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**Inheritance of the Past:
Patriarchy, Race and Gender in Faulkner's and
Chopin's South**

*A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Liberal Studies*

*By
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August, 2013*

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Introduction

Writing in 1960 in *The Burden of Southern History*, historian C. Vann Woodward commended southern novelists – Robert Penn Warren, Katherine Anne Porter and William Faulkner, among others – for giving meaning and value to southern history in their writing by confronting its chaos and irony. For Faulkner, in particular, there existed an almost obsessive need to investigate the broken South of his heritage, and in the process, to untangle fact from fiction in order to bring clarity to the turmoil of his southern contemporary world. He worked through this exploration in *Absalom, Absalom!*, wherein Quentin Compson reaches back decades to try to construct the story of antebellum planter Thomas Sutpen, whose legacy Quentin believes will lead him to comprehend the South of 1909 that he both loves and hates. Like his character, Faulkner and other southern authors probed the plantation culture and traditions of the slave-owning antebellum South, including white society's disastrous attempt to preserve its "peculiar institution" by waging civil war. The impact of defeat on the South's psyche and way of life proved to be as lasting as it was profound.

As a way to crystalize the historical period's impact on Southerners and their scribes, Robert Penn Warren concluded: "In the moment of death the Confederacy entered upon its immortality" (*Legacy* 15). For some Southerners, memory became enveloped in a reverence for a romantic past of "moonlight and magnolias." This vision of a cherished civilization recalled contented, faithful slaves serving dashing masters and their elegant and virtuous ladies on lush plantations. Lives were conducted with grace, courtesy and honor. Those memories, though, are a perverted view of a culture that was responsible for terrible suffering among millions of enslaved people. Faulkner understood

the phenomenon of southern memory, with its foundation in fiction and reality. In writing about Faulkner's "historical consciousness," Warren said: "If Faulkner feels the past as the repository of great images of human effort and integrity, he also sees it as the source of dynamic evil. If he is aware of the dynamic pull of the past, he is also aware that the submission to the romance of the past is a form of death" (*Faulkner* 269).¹

This historical consciousness, with its conflicting real and fanciful versions of the past, pervades the fiction chosen for this thesis, both in Faulkner's novels written in the 1930s and, more indirectly, in the works of Kate Chopin, who wrote forty years before him. The present-time action of Faulkner's novels occurs in 1909 in *Absalom, Absalom!* and 1932 in *Light in August*, decades in which Faulkner's Mississippi was still reeling from the aftermath of devastating Reconstruction years and later, from the ruinous Great Depression. Ruminations on earlier times and accounts of his characters' lives, though, return the reader to the relatively ordered and sometimes romanticized period of the antebellum South and then to the chaos of the Civil War that destroyed it. Chopin's characters move in Old South Louisiana plantation society in "Désirée's Baby" and in post-Reconstruction New Orleans and northwestern Louisiana in *At Fault* and *The Awakening*. As in Faulkner's novels, the recent past hovers near-by to inform the present of Chopin's works, which includes the intrusion of the modern world of the industrial North onto her agrarian South.²

The political and social struggles of Faulkner's and Chopin's time influenced their work, and common to both authors' fiction are the explorations of race, gender and class roles that were strictly defined in the antebellum South and then redefined by the Civil War years and beyond. Historian Drew Gilpin Faust suggests that the Old South

characterized race as “bound vs. free and superior vs. inferior,” gender as “independent vs. dependent and patriarch vs. subordinate,” and class by wealth, power and education (*Mothers* 3-4). She concludes that power in the South was defined by the biological distinctions of race and gender more than class (Faust, *Mothers* 4).

To Faust’s point, I will show the literature, which often mirrors what is happening in the world, argues for the notion that it was the white upper class male’s power base that gave order to and then destroyed the South. While the white men are represented as being in control, the largely powerless dependent and subordinate white women seem relegated to shoulder a disproportionate share of the region’s burdensome history, including the tragedy of miscegenation as perpetrated by the white man. An examination of the literature further reveals that as the white man frantically sought to shore up the post-Civil War racial hierarchy that was threatened by black emancipation, his own acts of miscegenation during slavery effectively made impossible his vision of a pure white superior race. With the construction of the white man as omnipotent, along with the black woman as sexually available to him, the white woman as defenseless and chaste, and the black man as the predatory brute, not only was the white supremacist design destined to fail, but it also guaranteed chaos.³ Faulkner and Chopin placed their characters into this complex scenario wherein they were forced to wrestle with their inescapable, tragic heritage. Often trying to hold on to the past, they failed, and unsuccessful though they might be, their characters had to strive to find a place and meaning within the modern world that inexorably forged ahead.

Faulkner and Chopin both examined class through the elite white male power structure, recognizing its pervasive influence on southern culture. In the antebellum

South's patriarchal world, the white male planter created and maintained order as the only truly free member of society. He was master over his wife, children, slaves and physical property. He drove the economy and the politics of the region. He expected his wife to manage the domestic affairs and to bear sons to perpetuate his line and preserve his property. In exchange, he supported and protected her. With characters such as Thomas Sutpen of Sutpen's Hundred in Mississippi and Leonce Pontellier of New Orleans, Faulkner and Chopin considered the consequences of this total white male domination then and for many decades after the Civil War.

In some ways, the weight of Southern history, with its foundation in tragedy and defeat, fell disproportionately on white women, so that their lives became profoundly difficult for many generations. The white male power structure of the Old South, and her complicity in it, defined the woman's role for good and bad. As an elite woman, she was delicate, dependent and unskilled, for the male role dictated that he support and protect her. Her person was imbued with the qualities of purity and honor, so that the southern woman evolved into a myth-like symbol of chastity and virtue. In the reality of her plantation life, fulfillment of her domestic duties, including bearing heirs, was made possible by the slave society that maintained the household and cared for the children. Her protected life unraveled, however, when the Civil War began and white men left home to fight. She was thrust into the unfamiliar role of operator of the plantation, manager of the slaves and provider for the family, including slaves, as well as the Confederacy. According to diaries of Civil War white women, with reluctance and fear, she stepped into the duties of a man while also learning to perform actual domestic tasks such as cooking and farming that had been the purview of slaves. Often widowed with

children or doomed to spinsterhood since twenty percent of military age southern white men died during the war, she could no longer rely on a man to protect her or provide for her and the family. The old order had disappeared to be replaced by the chaos of war and its unfamiliar aftermath.

The burden of race pressed heavily on women and the family for generations, in part because of racial mixing generated primarily by the elite white man. While Faulkner wrestled with the evils of slavery and realities of racial divisions, both authors addressed the tragedy of miscegenation, and “the white South’s inability to admit to or face the consequences of [it],” according to critic Ben Railton (50-51). Black women often became sexual slaves to their white masters, yet the mixed-race children they bore went unrecognized; rather than acknowledged as family, they were viewed as an addition to the master’s property. In a March 18, 1861, entry to her journal, southern plantation mistress and Civil War diarist Mary Chesnut explained the dynamic: “Like the patriarchs of old our men live all in one house with their wives and their concubines, and the mulattoes one sees in every family exactly resemble the white children – and every lady tells you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody’s household, but those in her own she seems to think drop from the clouds, or pretends so to think” (Chesnut 29).

The sexual availability of black women turned them into creatures, who were portrayed as sexually promiscuous beasts. Critic Minrose Gwin argues that just as the elite white women became “the emblem of chastity and powerlessness . . . it forced black women into the dark corners of the Big House to be used as vessels of sexual pleasure or to breed new property” (qtd. in Roberts 3). According to critic Diane Roberts, their

degraded and impure condition was in stark contrast to the elevated and pure status of white ladies (4), who often vilified black women, as Mary Chesnut reveals in an excerpt from her diary. “Only in fiction,” she explains, “do [negro heroines] shine. Those beastly negress beauties. Animals – tout et simple – cordifiamma – no – *corpifiamma*” (243).⁴ Even though it enabled her life of privilege, Mary Chesnut hated the institution of slavery. Yet, she viewed these black women as sexual and sensual beasts, who were responsible for disrupting families because of their sexual liaisons with white husbands and for “the mulattoes . . . [who] exactly resemble the white children” (Chesnut 29).

At its core, miscegenation immediately injured both black and white families. However, after the Civil War, as the white South again strove for racial superiority, which required racial purity, the offspring of miscegenation and, therefore, the South, bore an unbearable burden for generations. To attempt to understand the import of the tragedy, Faulkner and Chopin stocked their novels with characters who suffer for the sin. Nameless octoroons move in the background, caring for children and leaving the mistress to her leisure. Charles Bon is castoff by his father and killed by his brother. Clytie is denied a real place in the Sutpen family, yet she partners with her white sister Judith to preserve their father’s plantation. Joe Christmas is castrated and killed as a “nigger” rapist and murderer of a white woman. Rejected by her white husband for her rumored drop of black blood, Désirée Aubigny kills herself and their child. Finally, because he cannot accept the terrible reality of miscegenation, this curse of his white southern heritage, Quentin Compson ends his life.⁵ As Faulkner and Chopin revealed through their characters, the tragedy of miscegenation made victims of the unacknowledged persons as well as the families and society that rejected them.

Post-war South, with its emancipated slaves, also made it impossible for white women to maintain independence, for southern men were in a fight to reclaim their mastery. In the wake of Federal citizenship and voting rights granted to newly-freed blacks, white men found ways to assert their racial superiority. Over time, white dominated legislatures enacted Jim Crow laws that suppressed blacks. Freed black males had become feared as sexual predators who sought to pollute the white race through rape of white women and their virtuous daughters, so these laws enforced racial purity, protecting the rights of sons “to be born to the great heritage of white men,” according to W.J. Cash in *The Mind of the South* (119). As white men determined to maintain their dominance over all their property in the now slave-less South, their women’s hard-won independence of the war years evaporated. Propelled by fears of the black male, white women retreated into their traditional roles within the protection of the restored white male power structure.

With their consciousness of the past in the present, Faulkner and Chopin explored the wreck of southern society as it confronted an encroaching modern world. Forced to retreat to conventional domestic roles, women remained largely powerless against the controlling patriarchy. In the largely traditional South, domestic life is forced on upper class white women so that Edna Pontellier’s only path to freedom from a stifling marriage is suicide. In *At Fault*, however, Chopin shows that the agrarian and industrial, women and men can productively co-exist. The tragedy of miscegenation also played out in Faulkner’s and Chopin’s stories in which mixed race people struggled and failed to find a footing in the world that was becoming increasingly more hysterical about race.⁶ In fiction and life, then, the enduring construction of gender and race, with women’s

subordination to men and white suppression of blacks, as complicated by miscegenation, would play out over generations.

Since Faulkner and Chopin were writers who approached their work with an historical consciousness and both seem haunted by the past of their heritage, I believe the analysis of their work is enriched through linkage with the history that influences it. In this paper, therefore, I will begin with an historical chapter that will create the foundation for my arguments in chapter 2, which examines two of William Faulkner's novels, and chapter 3, which discusses three works of Kate Chopin.

In the first chapter, as frequently as possible, I have engaged the words of women who kept diaries during and after the Civil War. They will make their own argument about their positions as elite white women, although it is important to note that their comments are influenced by their doubts, fears, and biases. Since the women I have chosen to discuss from Faulkner and Chopin novels are elite white women from planter or respectable professional ancestry, the female diarists are as well. South Carolinian plantation mistress Mary Chesnut has a strong voice, and through other diarists and the work of noted historians such as Drew Gilpin Faust, a picture emerges of the deeply destructive nature of the southern patriarchy. As history shows and Faulkner and Chopin replicate, the price for women's lives of privilege is steep – complete subordination to men that Mary Chesnut likens to bondage. The war brings horrible deprivation and challenges to women, but it also offers them some independence, including choices outside the domestic sphere. We will see, however, that women remain restricted both by the “tenacious hold of traditionalism” (Faust, *Mothers* xiii), and new threats constructed by white men.

The diarists who speak in this chapter deplore the sexual exploitation of slave women by their white men. They also resent the mulatto children who are born of those unions. Herein lies the fundamental threat to their social order, for through miscegenation, we begin to see the failure of the racial hierarchy on which white supremacy and women's security depends. This creates a crisis for white men who demand only pure white blood in their dynasty. Their white racial paranoia rejects racial ambiguity and drives an interest in rigid and contrived racial classification systems, for example, of quadroons and octoroons, to describe a person's proportion of black and white blood. Note: such terms as pure white blood, racial purity, impure, one drop, mixed raced and other similar phrases that are employed throughout this essay should be viewed as social constructs used to define "black" and "white" identity rather than to serve as indicators of any biological or scientifically designed distinction.⁷ New laws are passed forbidding interracial sexual relationships or racially communal living. In short, to meet this threat to his superiority, the white man constructs systems around race.⁸ To this point, with respect to racial laws as an example, historian Barbara J. Fields explains: "Race does not explain the law. Rather the law shows society in the act of inventing race" (107). A related crisis, also constructed by the white man, imagines the now bestial black male desiring virtuous white women. We see evidence in diaries of white women's fear of black rapists. Vigilantes, lynching, and Jim Crow laws all conspire to subordinate the black man in an effort to preserve the pre-war social and racial hierarchy. As this chapter argues, over time and after much suffering by many people, the rigid racial constructions, which have been eroded by the white patriarch's miscegenation, cannot be indefinitely sustained.

In chapter two, I argue that Faulkner situates his story-telling in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Light in August* on the faultiness of anti-miscegenation as a means to preserve white supremacy as the prevailing social order. He creates Thomas Sutpen to illustrate the southern narrative about the birth of the omnipotent white patriarch who comes from nowhere to construct a dynasty on the backs of black slaves and in the beds of both his wife and black slave women. Like his historical counterparts, his vision of his dynasty or Sutpen's "design" is falsely grounded. Thus, we see the southern system of slavery at work, which both encourages and prohibits miscegenation. Sutpen, who needs white sons to build his dynasty, "got too many [sons]," explained Faulkner as an allusion to Sutpen's mixed race son, Charles Bon (UVA Conversations, April 13, 1957). Sutpen's and the South's strict racial code deny his "impure" son a place. Just like the South collapsed under its slave-based system, Sutpen's flawed design guarantees its failure, according to my argument.

In *Absalom, Absalom!* we also see the oppressions of women that Mary Chesnut describes, for Faulkner's women are treated as "incidental" to Sutpen's design and as commodities to be used and discarded. Like the historical families with mixed race offspring, the rigidity of the racial hierarchy requires wives and children of even questionable race to be rejected, ignored and abused, which Faulkner also explores in *Light in August*. His 1930s setting reveals a society that is even more race-obsessed than in *Absalom, Absalom!* and whose women are beaten down by the pressures of the unrelenting white patriarchy. Racial ambiguity is not tolerated; thus, Joe Christmas, who may be "pure white" or have "one drop" of black blood, strays from the social and legal code of strict separation as he tries to determine his racial identity. As a conflicted and

privileged white man, he lives and sleeps with black and white women. Ultimately, for the racial hierarchy to be maintained and in the merger of myth with reality, he is forced by white men to become the burly black beast who has ravished a white woman. In *Light in August*, Faulkner shows how unstable are the racial categories. With Christmas's death, the racial hierarchy seems to be restored. However, just like the last remaining Sutpen is a howling black "idiot," the presence of "hidden miscegenation" persists, showing the futility of hanging on to an archaic design.

In the three works of the final chapter, I argue that Chopin presents variations on the theme of the entrenched white patriarchy to illustrate the significance of time and circumstance for determining a woman's ability to survive within it. "Désirée's Baby" delivers the prototype of the powerless southern wife who is controlled by a brutal spouse. So close is it to the true stories recounted in her Civil War diary, this antebellum story of the omnipotent patriarch, subservient wife and available black slave with her mixed-race children could have come from the pen of Mary Chesnut. In *At Fault*, Chopin suggests that the convergence of the industrial and agrarian worlds will bring the opportunity for progress, even for a woman's circumstance. Accordingly, a woman seizes a plantation manager role and finds success beyond the domestic sphere, as long as she collaborates with a progressive man. However, Chopin paints a bleak picture of the modern city where idle women of a newly-prosperous middle class squander their opportunities and degenerate into gossip, drink and promiscuity. Refusal to adhere to the strictures of the conventional patriarchy in order to find personal freedom dooms the woman in *The Awakening*, for flexibility within her society's rigid structure is not an option in her time and place.

Racial tension is ever-present in *At Fault* and *The Awakening*, yet it operates more as an undercurrent with occasional surface eruptions. Although Chopin does not present racism as an impediment to economic and social progress in *At Fault*, I argue that she projects a potential for disruption in northwestern Louisiana that will have to be monitored and managed. The rich racial and ethnic culture in New Orleans appears to serve only as a back-drop of local color in *The Awakening*. Yet, I believe the central white woman's drive for her own freedom is stymied, in part, by her failure to recognize the worth of black and mixed-race people who serve her. Only in "Désirée's Baby" does Chopin, like Faulkner does in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Light in August*, overtly portray the slave system, or its residual, that permits miscegenation, tears apart families for impurity in the blood, and disrupts the racial hierarchy that it so desperately wants to protect.

Whether the subject is the stifling, misdirected white patriarchy, subjugated women or oppressed blacks, Robert Penn Warren's sentiment about the immortality of the Old South reverberates through the writing of the Civil War diarists, William Faulkner and Kate Chopin. This unique time in southern history, with its foundation in the deplorable system of slavery, rightly haunts southerners and their scribes, who must try to comprehend and record their understanding of the legacy, this broken heritage. What follows, then, is a selective look at history under the scrutiny of women, such as Mary Chesnut, who was "on the scene," and at the literature of southern writers, Faulkner and Chopin, who were compelled to interpret history in order to find meaning from the chaos.

Chapter One

Excavating the Burdens of Southern History:

The Litter of Blacks and Women in a White Patriarchy

Thousands of authors have tackled the Antebellum and Civil War South to try decode its enduring allure. They dissect its society, politics, personality and its “peculiar institution.” Civil War enthusiasts reenact battles, emulate military negotiations and speculate about a different outcome, attesting to the abiding interest in and reverence for the South’s “Lost Cause.”⁹ Like these many devotees of southern history and culture, William Faulkner and Kate Chopin were drawn to that period as an inspiration for their fiction. Their interest, however, was more than fascination with the time of their ancestors, for the challenges in their modern worlds were directly related to that history. Why were women stuck in a stifling patriarchy that denied them personal freedom, making them captive to the directives of domineering men? Why was a child deprived a place in a family because of one drop of black blood? What kind of logic labeled black men as sexual predators of white women or lynched a black man for looking at her? What was the rationale for the plethora of anti-miscegenation legislation when Faulkner was writing six decades after emancipation of the slaves?

A response to just one of those questions illustrates the value of understanding the past as a key to comprehending the present. In basic terms, in the South after emancipation, whites were unwilling to relinquish their position atop the long-established racial hierarchy. Starting at the end of the Civil War, white men were in a fight to retain superiority, which required suppressing the freed black man through physical threat, denial of Constitutional rights and institution of Jim Crow laws. To reiterate an earlier

point, during slavery, as a right of ownership, white men felt justified in using black women as sexual property, which resulted in “impure,” mixed-race offspring. His deplorable behavior returned to haunt him, for over time, as racial distinctions were disappearing through generations of miscegenation, “pure” whites became more determined to maintain their upper hand. Thus, when Faulkner was writing *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!* in the 1930s, increasingly stringent systems for racial identification and separation were being instituted and more anti-miscegenation laws were being passed as whites became more frantic to hold all the power over any person with even “one drop” of black blood. As we will see in chapter two, Faulkner examines this southern phenomenon of imaginative constructs through the racially unidentifiable Joe Christmas.

As we examine the literature of Faulkner and Chopin, we need to consider it in the context of the historical period that retained such a tight hold over their region’s psyche. We need to understand the totality of the white patriarchy as the determinant of the South’s fate, for by enforcing his absolute power to create and destroy, the elite white southern male took the region to war to protect slavery and the privileged way of life it provided. He effectively destroyed the lifestyle he was trying to preserve along with the institution of slavery that enabled it. As this chapter will show, as a result of the Civil War and the South’s defeat, he not only broke his pact as patriarch to protect and support white women, but with his earlier acts of sexual violence on black women, he effectively undermined through miscegenation the racial hierarchy he sought to uphold. In doing so, he constructed a complicated racial dynamic that would take one hundred years to resolve. We will also see that in his determination to re-affirm white supremacy after the

war and, therefore, his power in society, he effectively pressed women back into dependent roles in which they relied upon him for protection against violation by newly emancipated black males who were, supposedly, sexual predators. As we will learn with the help of women diarists, however, and as both Faulkner and Chopin reveal as they grapple with the history they inherited, as hard as the elite white male worked to suppress it, the enduring impact of miscegenation undermined his own fight for superiority and caused horrendous suffering for women and blacks along the way.

The Diarists – Voices of An Era

Southern women faced enormous upheaval in their lives during the Civil War, and many elite white women turned to their diaries as a means for self-reflection, as well as a place to express their opinions, doubts and fears. Historian Drew Gilpin Faust, who researched hundreds of diaries for her book, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War*, suggests the voices we hear through women's writings offer "the most significant source for our understanding of them and their era" (161). Not only is the drama of war recounted, but a picture of a society in transition, including the roles of women and the emancipation of slaves, unfolds as it is happening. We hear them struggle with the suitability of new roles that require them to step outside their accustomed private sphere into a public one, often challenging their vaunted delicate sensibilities. We feel their disillusionment with their men who promised to protect them in exchange for their allegiance, but who have abandoned them for the war. We sense their frustration with the complications of slavery that has enabled their life of privilege, but has also permitted their men to commit adultery with slave women. In short, their diaries provide an intensely personal account of their experiences in the

world they know as well as the one that is rapidly changing around them. We are granted the unique opportunity to examine their perceptions of the society of the Old South and their insights as it evolves. As well as a significant source for understanding women's issues, the diaries represent an historical record of the times that are central to the interests of the fictional works addressed in this essay. Among the many women who kept diaries are five who have been liberally referenced in this paper.

Mary Boykin Chesnut (1823-1886) was born and also married into wealthy South Carolina slave-holding plantation families. Her war-time diary reveals "her bittersweet indictment [of] what slavery did to the wives, children and families of the masters" (li), who sexually abused the slave women, according to the editor of her diary, historian C. Vann Woodward. She was sickened by the institution of slavery that enabled her own father-in-law's brood of mulatto children, but she also lamented the loss of her world: "I could tear my hair and cry aloud for all that is past and gone" (qtd. in Anderson 113).¹⁰

Ella "Gertrude" Clanton Thomas (1834-1907) kept a journal for forty-one years, from age fourteen to fifty-five, which was published as *The Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 1848-1889*. Like Mary Chesnut, she was the daughter and wife of wealthy plantation owners. Although she was raised to be a plantation mistress, uncharacteristically for the 1800s in the South, she was educated at Wesleyan College in Macon, Georgia, becoming an elementary school teacher after the Civil War brought the collapse of the family fortunes. In her later years, she was active in the Georgia Woman Suffrage Association.

Two other Georgians from slave-holding families, Eliza Frances Andrews (1840-1931) and Rebecca Latimer Felton (1835-1930), were staunch supporters of the

Confederacy and politically astute women, although their views differed on the South's reason for fighting. Felton believed the war was over the right to slavery while Andrews insisted the South was fighting for states' rights, views which they maintained their entire lives. After the war, Andrews became a teacher to support herself. She was also a writer who published poems, two botany textbooks, novels, and commentaries on wide-ranging subjects, including opinion pieces on why women should not have the right to vote. Of her long life and as a comment on the vanity of women, she said: "When a woman doesn't depend on her looks; she lasts longer" (Andrews 97). Felton spent her life as an advocate for improving the condition of rural women and children in the South, which she felt elite white women were in a unique position to impact, according to historian LeeAnn Whites (*Crisis* 160).

Kate Cumming (1830s-1909) kept a meticulous journal of her experiences during the Civil War as a Confederate hospital matron. She believed it was the elite woman's duty to nurse the wounded and "brave heroes who are sacrificing so much for us" (Cumming 66). Kate, like Phoebe Yates Pember, disregarded the unladylike requirements, unlike the typical elite white women who rejected nursing as unsuitable to the delicacy of the southern female.

Critic Kimberly Harrison argues that the diaries provide insight into how women "negotiated war-time dangers" and also "created . . . new self-images that responded to the demands of war" (243-244, 246). While some elite women, such as Kate Cumming, embraced without reservation her indelicate work of nursing soldiers, many more women shared their insecurities about the new demands on them. Their personal accounts allow us to hear their anxiety as they are forced to tackle the job of slave management, for

which they are by sensibility and skill ill-equipped to handle. We, likewise, hear their private disgust for miscegenation and their inability to prevent it. Their voices are important in the discussion, for they offer a unique insight into the complex society whose meaning Faulkner and Chopin worked so hard to understand. These five women, and the other diarists whose words appear in this essay, not only help us to comprehend the enormity of the challenge women faced as the protective world of the patriarchy fell apart, but they serve as validation for the insights of Faulkner and Chopin as the authors try to make sense of the era.

* * *

If the pre-Civil War southern patriarchy in which these diarists lived was constructed to give the white male complete power and independence, then these privileged white female accepted the role of subordinate and dependent. The most critical component of this arrangement was her guarantee of protection and security for herself and her children, a crucial element of the slave-holding, patriarchal “deal” that vanished during the Civil War and reappeared in its aftermath. In the pre-war plantation culture, however, she was sheltered from the outside world by strong and prosperous men. Accordingly, women of this class defined themselves in relationship to men: men were strong, and women were weak; men made decisions, and women obeyed; men set the rules, and women followed them. Elite white women understood that their subordination permitted them this privilege of a secure and protected life (Whites, *Gender Matters* 152). A romantic view of the secure shield of the “male protector” was expressed by twenty-four-year-old Eliza Frances Andrews in an 1864 diary entry: “Women, young or old, were intrusted to the care of any man known to their family as a gentleman, with a

confidence as beautiful as the loyalty that inspired it” (21). Thus, under the protective arm of their men, women functioned in the domestic sphere of house and children, while men operated in the wider world of business and politics. Her customary purpose in life was to marry and produce male heirs for the perpetuation of the family dynasty. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, for example, Ellen Coldfield, a woman from a respectable family achieved her purpose as a woman when she married Thomas Sutpen and bore him a son. Since marriage was her expected path, the alternative of spinsterhood was intolerable to her, often making her an outsider in her own class, as Faulkner illustrated with the difficult lives of Ellen’s sister, Rosa Coldfield in *Absalom, Absalom!* and Joanna Burden in *Light in August*. It was the unusual southern lady who, like Eliza Andrews, declared she would forgo the life of a married woman, for “marriage is incompatible with the [writing] career I have marked out for myself” (96). Three decades later, in *The Awakening* Kate Chopin wrote about a woman who tried to change the course of her life against the force of societal pressures; unlike Eliza Andrews’ atypical success as an unmarried woman, Edna Pontellier’s experiment with independence failed.

Whether a woman was single or married, as the domestic ideal of the tight family unit at the core of elite society, she served as both the actual and mythical emblem of Southern womanhood, for she represented the virtues of Christian goodness, chastity, and self-sacrifice along with loveliness and refinement in southern culture. On her behalf, southern men were said to have gone to battle, and Confederate currency displayed her as the “personification and patron of beauty, family, home, and gentility” (Johnson, *Hearts*). In short, in her sheltered role, she was “an intrinsic part of the patriarchal dream,” a fantasy that would be shattered by war (Scott 53).

Historical records show she was complicit in her subordinate role, which made her both a victim and a beneficiary of the social order. In her study of the patriarchy of the 1850s South, Anne Firor Scott, concluded that women, like the promotional picture of slaves, helped create the image of the happy plantation, but that such a picture was not the whole reality (53). Female discontent about men was evident in women's journals, and it was also a subject, for example, of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. Mary Chesnut often wrote about the plight of women in the southern patriarchy, calling it the "inevitable slavery of the world" and observing in 1865 that "all married women, all children, and girls who live on in their father's houses are slaves" (729). She suggested the "celebrated personality of Southern womanhood" was attributed to male-driven society that required submissiveness in the form of "whisper[ing] and deprecating voices," that are "the softest, sweetest in the world" (Woodward li, 735). She concluded that "the base submission of our tone must be music in our masters' ears" (Chesnut 735). While many women, such as Rebecca Felton understood their race and class privilege came at the price of subordination, others, like Mary Chesnut characterized her place as a form of bondage that made her, like black slaves, a commodity (Whites, *Gender Matters* 152). Just as Faulkner challenged Ellen Coldfield's forced alliance with Thomas Sutpen or Caddy Compson's status as the daughter whose arranged marriage will save the family's respectability, Mary Chesnut condemned the inescapable fate of women and black slaves. She laments: "You know how women sell themselves and are sold in marriage, from queens and downward, eh? You know what the Bible says about slavery – and marriage. Poor women. Poor slaves" (Chesnut 15). In her analysis of the period's abolitionists works, Karen Sánchez-Eppler argues that "by emphasizing and identifying

with the subjugation and silencing of the slave,” as Mary Chesnut does, “the white woman ‘asserts her right to speak and act, thus differentiating herself from her brethren in bonds. The bound silent figure of the slave metaphorically represents the woman’s oppression and so grants the white women access to political discourse denied the slave’” (qtd. in Birnbaum 304). Accordingly, Mary Chesnut and her peers, unlike their black slaves, had the ability to make the choice to remain in their dependent situations, even if it was culturally and legally difficult for them to challenge the status quo.

This same victim and beneficiary notion extended to her role in white supremacy and the domination of slaves (Rable 2). The patriarchal slave economy was responsible for her and her children’s prosperity and leisure. However, slave ownership also gave the men the power “to create a double standard of sexual behavior within the planter class itself” (Whites, “Crisis in Gender” 7), and this threatened marriage and family as well as racial separation and the overall patriarchy, which will be discussed later in this chapter. Women’s pre and post-Civil War journals recounted their disgust about female slaves who were treated like prostitutes by their masters. Yet, according to historian George Rable, the mistresses participated in a “conspiracy of silence” largely to protect their own class interests and maintain domestic stability (36). Diarist Ella Thomas wrote on January 2, 1858: “Proper ladies either did not know about, would not acknowledge, or simply ignored the existence of miscegenation” (qtd. in Rable 35). By definition, southern ladies were genteel, virtuous, delicate and dependent. While they recognized the gap between the dignified, wise men on whom they relied for protection and security and the corrupted men who had sexual relations with the slave women, as proper ladies they often ignored

the behaviors. The rules in the planter class were rigid, and the women understood it was their job to uphold them regardless of the damage done to them and their families.

Mary Chesnut expressed her hatred of the double standard and the harm miscegenation did to master's families. On August 27, 1861, she wrote: "A magnate runs a hideous black harem and its consequences under the same roof with his lovely white wife and his beautiful and accomplished daughters. He holds his head as high and poses as the model of all human virtues to these poor women whom God and the laws have given him" (Chesnut 168). Yet, some men did acknowledge responsibility for the mixed-race people. Faulkner gave an example of a man's understanding of his accountability in *Absalom, Absalom!* as Charles Bon explains to Henry Sutpen that "we – the thousand white men – made [the octoroons], created and produced them" (*Absalom* 91). Mary Chesnut clearly blamed the white men. She expressed sorrow and revulsion from the white planter wife's perspective, but she failed to acknowledge the tragedy of miscegenation for the black women, their families and the resulting mixed race children. Although Mary Chesnut saw upper class marriage as a state of bondage, she subscribed to the official view of southern womanhood as elevated and pure while the black slave woman was impure and degraded (Roberts 4).

Elite women such as Mary Chesnut and Ella Thomas had complaints about their lives in the patriarchy; however, they also appreciated their status within it. Accordingly, they typically stood by the traditional values of their culture (Rable 30). Some women, however, took their complaints regarding miscegenation to legal authorities, which speaks to the seriousness of the problem for them. In an examination of thousands of petitions to the Virginia legislature between 1776 and 1860, James Hugo Johnston found

several themes regarding men's relationships with slave women in divorce documents. The most prevalent divorce petitions involved white women naming slave women as the cause of their distress, repeated sexual alliances between their husbands and slaves, a husband having several black mistresses, some of whom treated the white wife badly or insolently, husbands who would not give up their black mistresses, and husbands preferring their mulatto children to their white offspring (Scott 59). In these cases, without censuring the husbands, paternalistic judges tried to be fair with the wronged planter class wives and protect their interests, sometimes awarding them property and child custody (Rable 11). In considering all the situations that probably were not addressed, Johnston also concluded that many women, rather than openly complain, "calmly or sullenly" accepted the situation (Scott 60). Although Dolley Madison first labeled such a position as "chief slave to the master's harem" (qtd. in Scott 60), it is a title that could as easily have come from Mary Chesnut.

* * *

The Civil War shattered the fundamental contract between elite white men and women, for as the war progressed, men were unable to provide women and families the support and protection that was the female's central expectation of the patriarchal social order. This rupture in gender relations was caused by "the hubris of planter-class men rather than insubordination of planter-class women" (Whites, *Gender Matters* 153). Since these elite men had total autonomy, they were able to ride off to war, leaving behind their vulnerable families. In effect, their position as the only truly independent part of southern society permitted them to switch their dedication to the political situation, with the

unintended result that they no longer were able to protect their families (Whites, *Crisis* 9).

Clearly, the impetus for the men going to war was the protection and defense of their families, homes, and a way of life, and women were deeply engaged in and supportive of their men and the southern cause. First of all, they wanted to be active and useful, so they immediately threw themselves into expanded versions of their domestic lives. By the end of 1861, more than one thousand women's groups developed on behalf of the southern war effort (Faust, *Mothers* 24). Women sewed uniforms, knitted socks and made gloves. They tirelessly raised money for military provisions, organized benefits and wrote patriotic songs and poetry glorifying the Confederacy. However, serving as the heart and soul of the Confederacy was not enough. As the war continued, their roles expanded to include management of the home-front, for three of every four southern white men of military age were at war. Women were needed to perform support services for the war effort, such as teaching, nursing, hospital management and working in government offices. They also were needed to produce goods, such as munitions, and raise crops (Faust, "Altars" 1200).

These requirements were met with concern by elite white women. On the one hand, they were willing and eager to sacrifice in the service of the Cause and, specifically, for their men at war. On the other hand, they were being challenged to perform in ways that their culturally-prescribed weaknesses and dependence on men left them ill-equipped to do. There were women, for instance, Lila Chunn of Georgia, who complained in a letter to her soldier husband of having to do things not suited to a southern lady: "The idea of a lady having to face and transact business with any and

everybody. It is alone suited to the North[ern] woman of brazen faces” (qtd. in Faust, *Mothers* 81). For these women, volunteer work suited their image of the “face” of the ministering angel, for it could be viewed as an extension of domestic life. Working in a government office was marginally acceptable because their work was attached to the war, and it provided needed wages which gave them a measure of independence. Transacting business, however, thrust them into the business arena, a “brazen” world which threatened the assumptions about behaviors suitable to women of the elite class (Faust, *Mothers* 90).

Nursing, along with teaching was a more natural fit for women who were accustomed to being in the service of others as part of their domestic management duties. Caring for the physical needs of family and servants, such as Faulkner having Judith Sutpen tend to the sick Charles Etienne, was expected duty. However, working in the public sphere of a hospital, especially a military facility, brought challenges to the southern elite woman’s “delicacy, modesty, and refinement” (Faust, *Mothers* 90), given that they would be exposed to strange men’s scrutiny and be required to care for men’s bodies. To this point, in *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner writes about Judith Sutpen’s work in Jefferson “in the improvised hospital where (the nurtured virgin, the supremely and traditionally idle) they cleaned and dressed the self-fouled bodies of strange injured and dead” (*Absalom* 99-100). Mary Chesnut “could not bear young girls to go to hospitals” (668), since they were exposed to common soldier’s comments, for example, about her young lady friend “Buck’s angelic beauty” (Chesnut 668). Mary Lee, who was involved with patients, although she dislike hospital work, dressed men’s wounds, “including those of an embarrassed colonel who had to be ‘considerably disrobed’ to permit her

ministrations” (Faust, *Mothers* 107). The men’s grotesque wounds and piles of severed limbs in the hospital caused many women to shrink from service in the hospitals, but the culturally-based improprieties founded in elite women’s femininity were also impediments.

Few prominent women actually became nurses or hospital matrons because of the unsuitability of the requirements of the position for women of their class. Two elite women, Kate Cumming and Phoebe Yates Pember, provide illustrations of ladies who overcame their reservations. Kate Cumming, a “lady” from Mobile joined the Confederate Medical system in 1862 at the same time that Phoebe Pember agreed to become chief matron of Chimborazo Hospital in Richmond. In her war journal, Kate Cumming consistently chastised her peers for not volunteering as nurses. She could not understand how they were “unwilling to nurse these brave heroes who are sacrificing so much for us” and why the “thousands [of women] . . . who do not know how to pass the time – rich, refined, intellectual, and will I say Christian?” would not “wake from their dream ere it is too late” and help in the hospitals (Cumming 66, 99). In her diary, Mary Chesnut shed light on the issue when she expressed her views on the incompatibility of most elite women and hospital work. In commenting on her nurse friend Louisa McCord’s abilities, she wrote: “How her strength contrasts with our weakness! She has the intellect of a man and the perseverance and endurance of a woman” (Chesnut 677). In this, she seems to be rebuffing Kate Cumming’s view that refined, delicate women can and should assist. Phoebe Pember, on the other hand, was at first concerned the life of a hospital matron “could be injurious to the delicacy and refinement of a lady” (2); however, she quickly adjusted and determined the presence of refined “ladies” improved

care in the hospital. By the end of the war, she closed her journal with a conclusive observation about her hospital experience: “A woman *must* soar beyond the conventional modesty considered correct under different circumstances” (Pember 90). Phoebe Pember, Kate Cumming, and Louisa McCord were exceptions, for most elite southern women were ill-equipped by training and disposition for the rigors of hospital work. Like Faulkner’s Judith Sutpen, those who succeeded had more masculine qualities of strong-mindedness and independence in contrast to the delicacy and refinement of the typical privileged white woman. Those who did not participate but who came into contact with nursing through reading to wounded men or serving food to them became “newly and painfully aware of their own inadequacies and of the debilities that arose from their femininity and privilege” (Faust, *Mothers* 112).

Through the expansion of their domestic duties, periodic assumptions of wage labor and forays into indelicate volunteer or paid work, such as nursing injured soldiers, southern elite white women were becoming more independent and increasingly forced to assume roles outside the traditional feminine sphere, often with feelings of complete inadequacy. In the pre-war marriage bargain, white men as masters were expected to protect and manage the family, plantation and slaves. Now, however, those duties became the women’s. One of her critical responsibilities and one which was most foreign and frightening to her was the running of the agricultural operation of the plantation. According to women’s war-time diaries, management of the plantation proved to be a formidable skill deficiency. Though they had lived on the plantations all their lives, their purview was limited to domestic management. Writing three decades after the war, in *At Fault*, Kate Chopin created a fictional woman as head of a prosperous plantation, which

required her management of paid black servants. A woman capably and comfortably in charge was odd in the 1880s in northwest Louisiana of the story. It was even more foreign in the real life of war-time South. With most white males away, however, only white women and slaves remained to perform the labor of the plantation in support of the war effort.

Since white men held the exclusive control of the slave system throughout southern history, by far the most unnatural and difficult task for a white female was slave management. When the white men left for war, the responsibility for overseeing the South's four million slaves largely transferred to her (Faust, "Homefront" 5). The patriarchal bargain required white men to manage the system of slavery and protect dependent white women from any related threats. In a complete reversal of responsibility, not only did women have to become independent and to "[direct] the slave system that was so central to the cause and purpose of the war," but they also had to do it without the male protection that was their right (Faust, *Mothers* 56). Even the government was uneasy about her taking the mastery role, but slave labor was required to support the war, so the elite white woman reluctantly assumed the responsibility. With her character founded on submission rather than authority, she was ill-equipped to supervise or control the slaves. They took advantage of her insecurities, as Ellen Moore from Virginia complained: "All [her slaves] think I am a kind of usurper and have no authority over them" (qtd. in Faust, "Homefront" 5). South Carolina plantation mistress Ada Bacot thought her "orders [were] disregarded more and more every day. I can do nothing so must submit" (qtd. in Faust, *Mothers* 62). Although the southern ideology portrayed slaves as loyal to their owners, in fact, as the war progressed, and the Federals moved

closer to a plantation, the less cooperative many slaves became. By January 1865, Eliza Andrews expressed concern about her sister's formerly "faithful" servants as the Yankees drew nearer to the plantation: "We can't take control over [the servants], and they won't do anything except just what they please" (69).¹¹

Women tried to manage the slaves, but it was clear the system needed the power of the patriarch to control them. Increasingly, as the slaves became less motivated to work and obey the mistresses' authority, the white women became more anxious about the possibilities of violence and insurrection. Culturally, it was the white males who wielded violence as an exercise of power. Elite white women, who by social design did not use violence, were now faced with employing physical force with unruly slaves and to protect their families (Faust, *Mothers* 64-65). Alice Palmer wrote in a letter to Hattie Palmer on July 20, 1865: "The idea of a lady exercising the required corporal dominance over slaves has always been repugnant to me" (qtd. in Faust, "Narratives" 183). An even greater concern, however, was the sense of threat from the slaves. Mrs. A. Ingraham of besieged Vicksburg wrote: "I fear the blacks more than I do the Yankees" (qtd. in Faust, *Mothers* 59). Desperate appeals to the Confederate government to send home men to manage the slaves and to beg for protection went unheeded. In a letter dated October 29, 1862, to G.W. Randolph, Confederate Secretary of War, Addie Harris of Alabama wrote: "I lay down at night and I do not know what hour . . . my house may [be] broken open and myself and children murdered . . . [for] my negroes very often get to fighting" (qtd. in Faust, "Narratives" 183). Reports and rumors of insurrections and murdered mistresses grew over the course of the war. Vulnerable and overburdened women became progressively more worried about lack of protection and their exposure to sexual threat

by hostile black slaves. A petition from a group of ladies from Jasper County, Mississippi, who feared a slave insurrection, asked authorities for male protection, or in its absence, “they requested arms and ammunition to defend themselves . . . so that ‘we die with honor and innocence sustained’” (qtd. in Faust, *Mothers* 59). These and other similar women who had counted on the loyalty of their slaves were now viewing them as dangerous and, specifically, they felt sexually threatened by the black males. With insufficient response, some women, such as Grace Elmore, started questioning the infallibility of their men: “How queer the times, the women can’t count on the men at all to help them; they either laugh at us or when they speak seriously tis to say they know not what to advise, we must do the best of our ability” (qtd. in Faust, *Mothers* 134). In New Orleans, the issuance of General Order 28 by the occupying Federal Army General Benjamin F. Butler drove home the point that southern men had abandoned their defenseless women (Rable 141). By threatening southern women who mistreated Yankee officers with being treated like prostitutes, that is, “as a woman of the town plying her avocation” (qtd. in Rable 141), the assumption of women’s feminine weakness and “vulnerability to sexual violation” was also reaffirmed (Faust, *Mothers* 211).¹² Despite their men’s and the Confederate government’s failure to support and protect them during the war, women were eager for men to return home to protect them and reclaim responsibilities that required male authority.

Why, then, did women willingly retreat to the patriarchal pre-war societal model? Their Civil War experience had uncovered disturbing things about themselves as well as their men. First of all, they came to understand that they could not rely completely on their males under all circumstances. The pact which had guaranteed them protection and

security in exchange for subordination had so thoroughly broken down during the war that women had to struggle on their own for basic sustenance. In the isolated countryside, they had lived in fear of slave revolts and Yankee soldiers. They had been forced to manage slaves, grow crops, and even work for remuneration in nursing, teaching and government jobs. Yet, as much as they proved not to be incapable or weak, they were exhausted from years of hardship and frustrated by being ill-equipped for the requirements of the man's role they were expected to perform. Thus, even though their defeated men seemed unreliable to them, the women were eager to give up their independence and return to their domestic roles as wife and mother, sister or daughter. When Thomas Sutpen arrives home after the war, Judith immediately relinquishes the plow to her father and returns to her domestic duties. Like Judith Sutpen, women believed that their men needed to re-assume the responsibility for the economic cares of their families; therefore, they were willing to relinquish scarce jobs and decision-making so that men could work and provide for them.

A larger reason for their retreat to the paternalistic hierarchy was their fear of black emancipation. They wanted white male protection from black males, and some was better than the absence they had experienced during the war. Elite women such as Rebecca Latimer Felton, who appreciated her independence during the war years was willing to relinquish her freedoms for white male protection from threats of assault and rape by the freedman (Whites, *Gender Matters* 154, 159), a role Percy Grimm assumed when he hunted down, castrated and killed Joe Christmas, the supposedly-black rapist-murderer of white Joanna Burden in Faulkner's *Light in August*. In Felton's view, the farming families were particularly vulnerable: "I know of no evil, which more unsettles

farm values and drives farmers to towns and other occupations than this lurking dread of outrage upon their helpless ones – in their home and on the highways” (qtd. in Whites, *Gender Matters* 160). Wives and daughters, the traditionally dependent, helpless females of pre-war culture, needed white male protection from the “lurking dread of outrage” or rape by the black man, the “evil” beast.

The emphasis on the imagined sexual dangers of the freed black man also served to reassert the racial hierarchy southern white men and women were determined to recapture after the war. With emancipation and black suffrage came fears of an increase in black male power, which became politically translated into sexual threats to virtuous white women, primarily of the planter class, according to critic Martha Hodes (232). Black men had been convicted of allegedly raping white women throughout southern history, but they had also often been loyal protectors of families on plantations. Now, however, white men and women were concerned that blacks might want to “exact vengeance” on them for their long enslavement, mistreatment and oppression. In a twist on this point, an article in the *Colored American* in 1866 stated that the white man “seems to be afraid that some of his daughters may do what a good many of his sons and himself have done time and time again” (qtd. in Hodes 237). The writer suggests that white women will seek out black men for sexual encounters just like the white men forced themselves on black women during slavery. Faulkner illustrates this possibility in *Light in August* as white Joanna Burden becomes a crazed nymphomaniac, panting “Negro! Negro! Negro!” in her wild sex with her black partner, Joe Christmas (*Light* 260).

In contrast, forty years later in 1906, Myrta Lockett Avary, a Confederate sympathizer, damned northern influence over the blacks during Reconstruction and wrote about “the ruin of innocent women by bestial blacks” and “white victims of negro lust” – “horror that justifies lynching” in her mind (qtd. in Clinton 317). Faulkner presented the reality of this view in his 1932 fiction with Percy Grimm’s killing and mutilation of Joe Christmas. Black activist and former southerner Ida B. Wells-Barnett presented a contrary position in a pamphlet designed to expose white atrocities against twelve black men who were lynched in March and April 1899 in Georgia. The results of an investigation into the lynchings revealed “only one [man] was even charged with an assault upon a woman” (Wells-Barnett 1). Yet, wrote Wells-Barnett in the pamphlet circulated by Chicago Colored Citizens, “Southern apologists justify their savagery on the ground that Negroes are lynched only because of their crimes against women” (Wells-Barnett 1). To her point, around that period, the protection of innocent southern white women, along with the suppression of blacks to ensure white supremacy, became central themes in the southern culture, as evidenced by the birth of the Ku Klux Klan, the lynching of black men, Jim Crow laws and anti-miscegenation laws. In short, black emancipation and black male suffrage, in large part, precipitated and cemented the southern women’s return to the traditional position of subordination in a revived white patriarchal society.

* * *

Inextricably tied to the imagined black male sexual threat to white women was miscegenation, which arose from the Old South slave culture as a powerful social theme that continued for more than one hundred years after the Civil War. The pre-war, slave-

owning “magnate,” who Mary Chesnut described as “run[ning] a hideous black harem and its consequences” (168), was now fighting to reassert his dominance. The “consequences” were now freedmen and women who posed a threat to his white supremacy in a complex way.

To appreciate this menace, it is essential to understand the history of miscegenation, that is, interracial sexual mixing, as an integral part of the South’s difficult heritage. Recognizing the North’s fear of miscegenation is also important. Most states in the North as well as the South had laws prohibiting black and white fornication and marriage, laws which remained on their books well into the twentieth century, especially in the South. In fact, miscegenation was such a volatile issue that in the 1858 debates with Stephen Douglas, Abraham Lincoln said he was horrified by “the mixing of blood by the white and black races,” and since most mulattoes in the South “have sprung from black slaves and white masters,” a “separation of the races is the only perfect prevention of amalgamation” or more precisely, miscegenation (qtd. in Sundquist 109-110). Lincoln’s solution was to separate the races by colonization of blacks to Haiti and African countries.

Playing on the public’s anxiety about racial mixing, in the 1864 presidential election, Democrats’ scare tactics included a bogus booklet purportedly written by the Republican Party, which advocated interracial sex and marriage in graphic terms. It was actually written and distributed by Democrats to stir up fears that if the Republicans won the election, it would have the effect of unleashing the “[uncontrollable] passion of the colored race for the white” (Hodes 231).¹³ The idea of colonization died, and the fear of racial mixing became less of a publically-debated issue in the North. In the South,

however, anxiety about miscegenation increased as white men strove to restore racial superiority and class prestige after the Civil War. Newly freed black men, with “uncontrollable passion” for white women, were understood by Southerners as threats to innocent women, racial purity and white superiority. State laws became more precise, as in the example of Missouri, which approved an anti-miscegenation law in 1869 because “mixed marriage cannot possibly have any progeny,” reports Werner Sollors in his book, *Neither Black nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (399).¹⁴ In another action in 1880 in Mississippi, the legal code was changed to ban intermarriage as “incestuous and void” (Sollors 400). Numerous court cases upheld anti-miscegenation laws such that by 1966, nineteen states, seventeen of which were in the South, still had interracial marriage prohibitions on their books. Finally, in June 1967, in *Loving v Virginia*, the “U.S. Supreme Court ruled 9-0 that anti-miscegenation laws are unconstitutional within the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment” (Sollors 409). With that ruling, the rest of the states repealed their laws.

As the history of the state laws and court rulings reveal, the proscription against miscegenation was strong. Critic Eva Saks argues that miscegenation law “acquired a power of its own, enabling it to create and sustain ideas such as the notion that race is, and resides in ‘blood’” (qtd. in Brattain 624). As such, in an attempt to monitor racial boundaries and contain interracial sex, miscegenation law “contribute[d] to the construction and reconstruction” of racial ideas, blending popular and scientific beliefs (Brattain 624-625). Regardless of the legal bans, though, the reality of and potential for sexual unions between whites and blacks created a “crisis of blood” that became the “crisis of the South” for that period (Sundquist 133).¹⁵ Faulkner exposed that “crisis of

blood” in *Absalom, Absalom!*: the mixed-race son Charles Bon was not Thomas Sutpen’s son because the father would not acknowledge a black son in his design or dynasty; furthermore, the half-brother Henry Sutpen was not brother to his half-brother Charles Bon because of the father’s denial. In a 1957 conversation with students, Faulkner explained the dynamic of the slave-based Sutpen dynasty, which could be broadened to expose the South’s crisis and fear of racial pollution. He said of Sutpen: “He wanted a son which symbolized [his] ideal, and he got too many sons – his sons destroyed one another and then him. He was left with – the only son he had left was a Negro” (UVA Conversations, April 13, 1957).

Just as Thomas Sutpen denied paternity to Charles Bon, many planters opted not to recognize their mulatto offspring. As noted earlier in the chapter, planter class women’s diaries, such as Mary Chesnut’s and Ella Thomas’s, included expressions of disgust for the depraved sexual behavior of the master who treated his black female slaves as prostitutes and disdain for the wife who ignored the situation as well as the offspring. In her post-Civil War memoirs, Rebecca Latimer Felton decried miscegenation as the doom of slavery and the South. She talked about white masters whose “unbridled lust” made them guilty of moral abuses “that made mulattoes as common as blackberries” (Felton 93, 79). She wrote about the “crime that made slavery a curse” in this way: “When white men were willing to put their own offspring in the kitchen and corn fields and allowed them to be sold into bondage as slaves and degraded as another man’s slave, the retribution of wrath was hanging over the country” (Felton 95, 79). Not only were the offspring unrecognized, but they could be removed by being sold on the auction block by their own fathers.

Eric Sundquist, in his discussion of miscegenation and incest in *Absalom*, *Absalom!* suggests that “slavery controlled miscegenation” (135). If the offspring were not recognized, then neither miscegenation nor the chance of incest could exist. The freeing of slaves erased that fiction, and according to Sundquist, “emancipation not only released a convulsive hysteria about potential miscegenation in the form of black violence against white, then, it may also be said to have destroyed the mechanisms of control that were a barrier to incest and to have made possible, if not entirely likely, a further mixing, a ‘monstrous’ violation in which, because both black and white strains could be hidden from view, miscegenation and incest could occur at once” (Sundquist 135). Thus, as Faulkner showed by suggesting the marriage of Charles Bon to his half-sister, but non-sister, Judith Sutpen, and the 1880 Mississippi law tried to eliminate, incest, a “monstrous violation,” was included in the “crisis of blood.”

As historians have discovered and novelists have tried to interpret, the white South persisted in its hopeless battle to suppress the blood crisis and preserve racial purity. Try as they might to create racial absolutes, for example, with a system of octoroons and quadroons to indicate inherited proportions of black and white blood, one fact remained. Socially and legally, one drop of black blood categorized an individual as black, thereby disregarding all white ancestry and thrusting a person into inferior status.¹⁶ Charles Bon mistakenly dismissed “a little spot of negro blood” as a “little matter” in reference to his octoroon companion and likely as a comment on its insignificance in himself (*Absalom* 247). However, as Faulkner and Chopin understood, whether it was Faulkner’s Charles Bon, whose father denied his paternity for his son’s “spot of negro blood” or Chopin’s Désirée, who was rejected by her husband for rumor of her black

blood, “race usurped the terms of blood and kinship” in the South (Sollors 44). This consequence of miscegenation, as perpetrated by the elite white male of the patriarchal plantation South and lamented by our diarists, would damage and oppress the lives of women and blacks for years to come.

As we saw in her diary entries, Mary Chesnut deplored the white plantation master’s sexual exploitation of black women. In fact, her comments were personal, for her father-in-law fathered children with his black slaves. She also understood, however, the prosperity and privilege which men of her class, like her husband’s father, provided to women like her. In that regard she mused: “[A husband] is the fountain from whence all blessings flow” (Chesnut 169). She also complained that, “there is no slave, after all, like a wife” (Chesnut 59), to express her contempt for the legal and cultural condition of women as property. As historian Faust concludes and novelist Faulkner shows us in the next chapter with Thomas Sutpen of *Sutpen’s Hundred*, “[white] male prerogative and [white] male responsibility . . . served as the organizing principle of southern households and southern society” (*Mothers* 32). While Faust’s reference is to the antebellum master of the plantation like Sutpen, we will see in the 1930s setting of *Light in August*, that the entrenched patriarchy of omnipotent white men, subjugated and powerless white women, and exploited blacks remained unchanged.

Chapter Two

Navigating the Southern White Patriarchy in

William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Light in August*

Introduction

The southern world in which William Faulkner lived and wrote defiantly maintained its insistence on anti-miscegenation as a means to ensure white supremacy. In 1930, for example, during the decade in which *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!* were published, the state of Mississippi enacted a criminal statute making a punishable crime “publishing, printing, or circulating any literature in favor of or urging interracial marriage or social equality [of the races]” (Sollors 4). Two decades later, a Virginia miscegenation statute was upheld in a court case, so that “the corruption of blood” and a “mongrel breed of citizens” were prevented (Sollors 19). While Faulkner publically argued for improving the position of blacks and acknowledged the inexcusable crimes against blacks in his South, he also insisted the legal solutions advocated by northern liberals to overturn segregation could not solve the complex, multi-generational and deeply-rooted cultural problem of race (Faulkner “Letter”). In a conversation with students at University of Virginia (UVA) in 1957, he explained his view on miscegenation in the 1950s social scheme. He said that having mixed blood is not wrong; rather: “There’s no law that is going to prevent Romeo and Juliet no matter what color they are . . . It’s simply a mistake and an error as conditions are now, and an individual suffers because of it” (UVA Conversations, April 13, 1957). Of course, Faulkner’s comments occurred ninety-two years after slavery was abolished. Until that time, by law Romeo was the white master and Juliet was his black sexual slave who had no choice but

to submit to her owner. The mixed-blood offspring of the Old South, that “mongrel breed,” came from the forced and brutal coupling of the master and slave, hardly the star-crossed lovers of Faulkner’s allusion whose union is driven by mutual love and attraction.

As it was discussed in the previous chapter, whether it is in the Old South or a hundred years later, through custom and law, southern society tried to contain race within strict definitions. The volume of miscegenation and segregation laws in southern states, the pressures to maintain racial hierarchies, and the system of classification denoting amounts of blackness attempted to regulate the social order. Faulkner investigates the reality of the stretched and breached boundaries. He is particularly persistent in his determination to explore southern racism, and in both *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, he focuses on the devastating impact of miscegenation on multiple generations. The sheer number of characters whose lives are disrupted or destroyed by miscegenation in *Light in August* speaks to his commitment to explore its damaging effects. It means death for Milly, a life of sorrow for Mrs. Hines, abuse to multiple black and white women with whom Joe Christmas crosses paths, death for Joanna Burden, and castration and death for Christmas. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, the number of characters over four generations of Thomas Sutpen’s miscegenated relationships is even greater, with repercussions that include desertion, murder and potential incest. Through these characters and their stories, Faulkner demands the reader accept a central fact of southern history that was enunciated in the previous chapter: the white patriarch who built the slave South and separated the races to ensure white power was the very cause of its downfall. The white master abused his power over black slave women. Then, he failed to acknowledge his mixed-race offspring because of the black-tainted blood. Yet, at the

same time the white patriarch was insisting on white purity in his family and lineage, through miscegenation, he was effectively destroying anti-miscegenation, which eroded slavery, and, simultaneously, his racial supremacy.

Faulkner concentrates his attention in *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!* on the faulty nature of this race-based societal design and the resulting human turmoil. He argues that miscegenation has irreparably made impossible racial definitions. Thus, in his novels, even as white society adamantly maintains the organizing principle of strict racial separation and identification, its efforts are complicated or thwarted by miscegenation. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Sutpen's "design" collapses under the weight of its flawed central operating principle, racial purity. In both novels, Faulkner shows the tremendous suffering of the people over generations who are impacted by the sin of the controlling power in society. As this chapter will show, the societal insistence on clear and exclusive racial distinction creates impossible pressures on the victims who are denied family, identity and a place in the world.

Just as it has done for the races, white male-driven society has constructed the boundaries for gender, and if the males possess the superior, independent and controlling positions, women are the powerless and dependent opposites. Faulkner criticizes this societal construction by showing women being used as commodities by men, so that they are valued, for example, for bearing heirs, but discarded when they become barren, such as Joanna Burden and Ellen Coldfield. Faulkner also maintains the white women are often pawns of men's destructiveness, whether it is through war or within the family and community.¹⁷ Thus, decades after the Civil War in southern Mississippi, many women in *Light in August* appear beaten down by men. For instance, Mrs. Hightower commits

suicide in a Memphis brothel after she is driven there by her inattentive, self-centered husband; Mrs. McEachern is mentally abused by her severe, misogynistic husband; and Mrs. Hines has endured decades of marriage to fanatical, hatred-filled Doc Hines. Faulkner also shows his admiration for women's ability to withstand hardships and for their capabilities beyond the prescribed familial life. Some, like "Yankee" Joanna Burden, exist as outsiders in the community. Others pursue temporary duties outside their traditional sphere when duty calls. To this point, just like the southern women during the Civil War that we met in the previous chapter, the genteel white women of aristocratic and respected families in his novels must step out of their roles as mistresses of domesticity to manage the plantations, including producing crops that will support the family and contribute to the Confederate cause. They prove to be competent without the men. Yet, as quickly as their men return from war, characters such as Judith Sutpen and Rosa Coldfield are thrust back into the traditional roles in which, as subordinates, they are managed by men. They are effectively squeezed back into the narrow roles defined for them by men, a situation which Faulkner often challenges. As this chapter will show, just as the debacle of miscegenation presses characters into unendurable situations in *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, the condition of women imposed by the white patriarchal South often makes their lives unbearable.

***Absalom, Absalom!:* “A Vision of the Future Falsely Grounded”**

In the patriarchy of the Old South, the elite white male possessed the power to create and to tear down. For good and bad, his interests, decisions and actions drove southern society, fundamentally dictating the lives of those around him. Faulkner's interest in understanding the southern man who ascended into aristocracy is demonstrated in his creation of Thomas Sutpen. Through Sutpen's story in *Absalom, Absalom!*, as imagined by several narrators, Faulkner recreates a page from southern history about the building of the Old South and its plantation society. Using four narrators with different points of view, Faulkner blends historical fact and speculation to construct the Sutpen legend that becomes a vehicle for trying to give meaning to the South's history.¹⁸ With Sutpen's story, he maps the patriarch's and the South's downfall through the failure in their design, which is centered on southern society's flawed system of slavery, racism and miscegenation, or as author Robert Penn Warren describes it, “a vision of the future falsely grounded” (*Faulkner* 268). What makes Faulkner's story so arresting is his revelation that its design, that is, the very system white society, and in particular, white men constructed to separate the races for their cultural and economic benefit is impossible to achieve.

The term “design” is used throughout *Absalom, Absalom!* by the narrators and Sutpen to indicate the architecture of the dynasty he creates. His goal and methods for achieving them mirror other determined, often lower class men of the old South who sought to chart their own destinies. The patriarchal slave culture allows him to come out of nowhere to practically steal and then tame the land with his drive, will and slave labor. He quickly learns that power and ownership are requirements for independence and

stature: “You have got to have land and niggers and a fine house” (*Absalom* 192). Along with wealth and property, his design for his aristocratic dynasty includes a central element – a virginal, fertile and, ideally, respectable wife of exclusively white ancestry who will bear equally white sons to continue the Sutpen dynasty. His dedication to his design is complete and unalterable, and he drags along with him women, wives, children and slaves, all powerless against his determination.

Just like the Old South built its wealthy, aristocratic society on the backs of its slave economy, Faulkner allows Sutpen to successfully achieve his design. He buys one hundred acres from an Indian chief and calls it Sutpen’s Hundred. He builds a mansion, marries, has children, including a son and heir, owns slaves and amasses wealth. His design seems complete. However, just like the South-initiated Civil War destroyed southern society, including bringing freedom to its black slaves, Faulkner has Sutpen undermine his design through his own actions. Using Sutpen as his model, Faulkner illustrates how the South’s omnipotent white male patriarchy made innocent, virginal southern women into commodities, marking them as dependent and powerless and eventually crippling or destroying them. In the same vein, he reveals the unintended consequences of white males raping black slave women and then failing to acknowledge paternity to the mixed race offspring. These actions destroyed the racial segregation white males desired and made impossible the white racial purity that defined southern society. In Sutpen’s case, just like the faulty southern system with its impossible design, the irreversible consequences of miscegenation and his denial of its existence finally bring down his dynasty.

* * *

The white men of the southern patriarchal society held women hostage by treating them as commodities, prescribing their role and discarding them when they were no longer useful. By the fact of male domination, women were made submissive. By the need for and expectation of a man's protection, women were dependent. As elite women acknowledged in their diaries, women often benefitted from this system, but they were also betrayed by it. In this vein, from his first wife Eulalia Bon to the white cracker, Wash Jones' granddaughter, Milly, the women in *Absalom, Absalom!* are captives of Sutpen's design.

As depicted earlier in this essay, in her Civil War diary, Mary Chesnut characterized wives as slaves when she wrote: "There is no slave after all, like a wife" (Chesnut 59), as did Dolley Madison, who said decades earlier that a wife was "chief slave to the master's harem" (qtd. in Scott 60). As white women, they were superior to the slaves in terms of race. Like slaves, however, because of their gender, wives were treated as commodities to be traded, as needed, based on their value to their husbands. Faulkner denounces the inhumanity and unreasonableness of this system both in *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* In *The Sound and the Fury*, daughter Caddy Compson is viewed by family as a means to recapture their status and fortune through a marriage to a boorish man with social and financial prominence. Rather than a beloved daughter who should be cherished for her compassionate spirit, she becomes a reckless girl who seeks love indiscriminately with men; in doing so, she loses her value in the marriage market, and thus, to the family. Faulkner expands the theme of women as economic asset in the Old South male-dominated system in *Absalom, Absalom!* He grants

patriarch Sutpen two wives, Eulalia Bon and Ellen Coldfield, each of whom is bartered by her father. Like women of the Old South, they, too, are “goods to be transacted in marriage,” wrote Diane Roberts in her study *Faulkner and Southern Womanhood* (112). Sutpen’s need for a wife is clear, as he explained to General Compson: “To accomplish [my design] I should require money, a house, a plantation, slaves, a family – incidentally of course, a wife” (*Absalom* 212). This incidental wife has no place in helping him achieve the design other than to bear him a son to continue his dynasty after he has passed away, according to critics Joseph Uργο and Noel Polk (141). The wealthy Haitian planter accepts him as a son-in-law even though Sutpen is clear about his “obscure origins” and lack of possessions or property. Sutpen suggests that the planter may have been grateful for risking his life for them in a slave uprising, but Faulkner leaves unclear the planter’s actual motives for accepting a suitor without the usual accouterments. One possible purpose of Faulkner’s intentional ambiguity is to magnify three important concepts in the novel that will be addressed in this chapter: the individual with mixed blood trying to “pass” as white to escape her black heritage, the perpetuation of miscegenation through the unintentional siring of another mixed race child, and the potential for incest in unacknowledged mixed-race offspring.

Faulkner again raises the issue of wife-as-commodity in the inhumane paternalistic system, but this time the stakes are much higher since Sutpen is farther along in accomplishing his design, having accumulated some wealth from his father-in-law. Within four years, Eulalia dutifully bears him a son and heir in accordance with Sutpen’s plan. After his son is born, though, Sutpen concludes: “It [was] impossible that this woman and child be incorporated in my design;” so, “I provided for her and put her

aside” along with the son (*Absalom* 212, 194). As the story unravels, the narrators conclude the likely reason he repudiates the wife and child is his discovery that Eulalia has black blood, which means his son and heir has it as well.¹⁹ He believes she and her father have deliberately withheld that information from him, but the novel leaves vague the nature of the father and daughter’s misrepresentation to Sutpen. It becomes his way of dealing with her flaw, that is, his callous extrication of himself from an imperfect family that eventually causes his downfall (Urgo and Polk 140). However, the essential point at this juncture is that she was “not and could never be adjunctive or incremental to the design” because of the impurity of her blood, according to narrative speculation (*Absalom* 194). If the central element of Sutpen’s design is the integrity and purity of the white line, not a trace of black blood is acceptable. The mother and child cannot be “incorporated,” for a mix of ingredients, namely, black and white blood, cannot be combined in his dynasty. Sutpen essentially returns his wife and son, along with a financial settlement, to the planter father in exchange for his freedom, some slaves and the opportunity to tackle his design in America without being bound to unacceptable family. Although he admits there might be some injustice in his treatment of them, he believes he has upheld his bargain, and views himself as done with them. Sutpen’s inhumane conduct, which shows how little he values other human beings, including his own flesh and blood, is condemned by Faulkner as representative of the flawed southern system.

The “incidental” value of a wife to his design increases when Sutpen begins to prosper after he has built his plantation outside Jefferson. If he is to ultimately be accepted as grand master of Sutpen’s Hundred and social superior of Jefferson, he must

have “the respectability of an acceptable wife” in addition to his land, plantation and slaves, according to critic Donald M. Kartiganer (293). His design requires respectability in his lineage, which will begin with his children if he acquires the right wife (Kartiganer 298-299). Ellen Coldfield’s father is a man with an impeccable reputation for “puritan uprightness,” and alliance with his family would erase or at least mask Sutpen’s questionable conduct, including his previous alliance with the Haitian planter’s family. Again, Faulkner censures the idea of woman as a commodity to be bartered, and in this case, for respectability. Sutpen buys his virtuous wife, possibly in exchange for his silence about Mr. Coldfield’s involvement with him in an unsavory business venture.²⁰ As Rosa Coldfield narrates the story, Sutpen got the “best possible moral fumigation” with “Ellen’s and our father’s names on a wedding license (or any other patent of respectability)” (*Absalom* 38, 11). Along with providing respectability, Ellen succeeds at producing a son, Henry, to fulfill a central requirement of Sutpen’s design. During her life at Sutpen’s Hundred, she never achieves the status of heroic, gracious plantation mistress (Roberts 31), for as Mr. Compson remarks: “If she had the fortitude to bear sorrow and trouble [Ellen] might have risen to actual stardom in the role of matriarch” (*Absalom* 54). It is not, however, her inability to fulfill the role of the mythical courageous matriarch of the plantation that causes Ellen’s exit from the novel. Rather, her son has repudiated his birthright, leaving Sutpen without a legitimate heir to fulfill his plans of a great dynasty. By this time, she is too old to bear another child. She begins to fade away and then abruptly dies as a woman who is no longer of value to his design. Faulkner saves Sutpen the trouble of dispensing with Ellen by writing her out of the novel while the master is away at war.

With this tactic, Faulkner frees the war-weary and aging Sutpen to beget an heir in whatever way he can without regard to human decency. By doing so, Faulkner further condemns the system that allows the patriarch to treat women as chattel, without censure from society. In his unwavering quest to restart his design, he relinquishes respectability in favor of expediency and fertility, but he retains the central requirement of pure white ancestry. Sutpen first targets virgin spinster Rosa Coldfield and offers her marriage, “[suggesting] that they breed together for test and sample and if it was a boy they would marry” (*Absalom* 144). His frank proposal is based on his cognizance “that he was now past sixty and that possibly he could get but one more son, had at best but one more son in his loins” (*Absalom* 224). Given his age, both urgency and deliberation are now essential to his plan, and one white female is as good as another. When Rosa refuses him in outrage to her feminine virtue and honor, he then breeds with Milly, the teenage granddaughter of white trash-squatter Wash Jones. She bears Sutpen a daughter, whom he dismisses with a comment that underscores his view of women as commodity: “Well, Milly; too bad you’re not a mare too. Then I could give you a decent stall in the stable” (*Absalom* 229). Granted, the story is being constructed by various narrators, including Quentin Compson and his father; thus, Sutpen’s actual words and actions may not be as harsh and unfeeling as the imagined ones. Regardless, they establish a pattern of using and abusing women as commodities, and in Sutpen’s specific view, as incidental to his design.

In addition to being treated as commodities that were discarded when their perceived value ended, southern women were prescribed set roles within the male hierarchy. As outlined in the previous chapter, men served as protectors for their southern

women who represented beauty, family and home in their culture. Accordingly, women expected to be sheltered wives and mothers who created a life of gentility and elegance within the family, or as Mr. Compson describes their purpose: “to love, to be beautiful, to divert” (*Absalom* 93).²¹ Faulkner exposes the impossibility of life for the women who are locked out of the system and which makes them relics who no longer fit in society. In considering southern women and, specifically, Rosa Coldfield, Mr. Compson tells his son Quentin: “Years ago we in the South made our women into ladies. Then the War came and made ladies into ghosts” (*Absalom* 7). Mr. Compson’s “we” refers to the men of the patriarchal South who imposed on “ladies” the roles of wife and mother as the only avenue available to gentlewomen. Rosa grew up with expectations for marriage and a life common to women of her class (Mesquita 60). Yet, in his narration, Mr. Compson relegates Rosa to shadow-hood, a ghost-like lady, since she is a spinster who seems unable to find a place for herself after a life of trying to penetrate the patriarchy, according to critic Olivia Carr Edenfield (57-58). She is powerless to achieve true womanhood. Her dependence on men to validate her life is made clear by Mr. Compson who says the elderly Rosa is “a breathing indictment ubiquitous and even transferable of the entire male principle (that principle which had left [her] a virgin at thirty five)” (*Absalom* 46-47). Males in this system possess the power to select the women they want in their lives and to choose their sexual partners. Likewise, the “male principle” gives them the power not to select a wife and sexual partner (Urgo and Polk 28). As Faulkner shows through Sutpen’s choices, women are selected and rejected according to their fit in his design. Thus, excepting the rejection of Sutpen’s outrageous breeding proposition, through no decision of her own, Rosa is relegated to a frustrating and unfulfilled life as a

spinster with the “rank smell of female old flesh long embattled in virginity,” according to Quentin (*Absalom* 4). His description contains a kind of repulsion for her virginal flesh that is cruel considering he is of the controlling gender that has locked her out of the only valued roles, wife and mother, that are available to women of her kind.²² She is, indeed, a relic, that woman who has “survived from the past but is now outdated” and has no value to men or society (*OED*).

Although Faulkner’s writing indicates his understanding of the difficulties for women under the paternalistic system, he also applauded their spirit of endurance in the face of decay and destruction caused by the white male power structure. Historically, in the devastating, harsh Civil War years, women were forced to adjust in order to survive. They became the champion and protectors of the southern home front while the men were at war (Mesquita 56). Faulkner also allows the women of *Absalom, Absalom!* to develop multiple abilities beyond the domestic sphere. Yet, as was typical in the South after the war, they were required to return to traditional roles. To illustrate how widely different women were able to adapt to harsh circumstance, Faulkner shows two genteel white women, Rosa and Judith, in the war years. Most easily able to cope is Sutpen’s daughter Judith, whom Faulkner endows with the masculine traits of courage, independence and resourcefulness, just as he does with Joanna Burden in *Light in August*. Judith effectively employs her strengths to maintain Sutpen’s Hundred while her father fights in the war. As a child, she exhibited the spirit of a fearless adventuress, watching slaves fight and demanding wild carriage rides. Her fighting spirit and masculine qualities help her manage during the difficult times, and she is admired for this despite the requirement of weakness and gentleness in southern ladies.²³ Her aunt Rosa, who represents the fragile,

powerless, and dependent lady of the Old South, is forced to take the role of provider when her conscientious-objector father withdraws from the world at the war's beginning. In managing their survival, she takes on both the role of the male and the slaves her father has freed. Later, at Sutpen's Hundred during the final war years, and with her mantle of independence firmly in place, Rosa contends: "It did not even require the first day of the life we were to lead together to show us that we did not need [Wash Jones help] . . . I who had kept my father's house and he alive for almost four years, Judith who had done the same out here, and Clytie who could cut a cord of wood or run a furrow better (or a least quicker) than Jones himself" (*Absalom* 124). At Sutpen's Hundred, Rosa remains in the domestic sphere more suitable to ladies, while Judith and Clytie jointly run the entire plantation, keeping alive the family and remaining few plantation workers since most of the slaves have fled. Judith ultimately retreats to her feminine role as wife-to-be and ministering angel to the troops returning home from the war. In southern history, the return of the men took away a woman's chance to be something else. True to the white patriarchy, the men reclaimed their jobs managing the land. So, Judith again becomes the supportive, caring and obedient daughter when Sutpen triumphantly returns home astride his horse to reclaim his plantation. In the end though, Faulkner makes her a casualty of Sutpen's design and its destructive force, for she dies of yellow fever while caring for Sutpen's unacknowledged mixed race grandson. Once started, Faulkner seems to say, whether it is war or miscegenation, the decay wrought by the patriarchy is irreversible, and even though they are able to endure for a time, even the strongest women are vulnerable victims.

* * *

Just as he condemned the patriarchal system's enforced powerlessness of women, in the case of miscegenation, Faulkner confronts the flaws in the accepted southern white male narrative on race relations in the Old South, Civil War and Reconstruction. He presents the sin of slavery and its offspring, miscegenation, as the continued wrong which the South can never escape (Railton 50). Through the legal and cultural legislation, the "one drop" rule dictates that black blood must trump whatever large or small percentage of white blood is in a person, generation by generation. Although white men primarily created the mixed race through sexual crimes against black female slaves, they did not accept the impure offspring in their lineage. For one thing, legally, the child assumed the mother's race. Also, these children were simply not recognized by their white father, even though, as Mary Chesnut writes: "The mulattoes one sees in every family exactly resemble the white children" (Chesnut 29). The logic was that if they were not acknowledged, the problem of their heritage did not exist. Sometimes they were sold; often, they grew up in the same household but without family status. In *Absalom*, *Absalom!*, Clytie, Sutpen's daughter with a black slave brought from Haiti, lives with the family as "free, yet incapable of freedom who had never once called herself a slave" (*Absalom* 126). This is the "debacle [of miscegenation] that makes Clytie neither slave nor free (neither before nor after the war)" (Sundquist 124). In the way she is treated, she is neither a slave, nor a free woman. She is, in fact, slave sister to Judith, sleeping on a pallet by her white half-sister's bed, yet she serves as Judith's childhood friend and natural equal partner in preserving Sutpen's Hundred during the Civil War. No matter their closeness – the divide of miscegenation cannot be bridged, according to Faulkner.

After the war, as the sole remaining Sutpen/not Sutpen, she cares for her white half-brother Henry and more distant relation, Jim Bond. During the war years in particular as they jointly run the plantation and keep alive its inhabitants, family ties between Judith and Clytie are strengthened while the color lines are blurred.²⁴ Her father Sutpen, however, acknowledges exclusively members of the white race in his design so that he rejects Clytie, a son and a wife for their black blood, no matter if the amount is one half, one quarter, one eighth, one sixteenth or one drop.²⁵ Through the slow revelation of the real and imagined story of Sutpen and the fate of his family over generations, including the unacknowledged mixed-race line, Faulkner confronts the destructiveness of miscegenation within the family and society as well as the problems of kinship and racial ambiguity that surround it.

As he did in *Light in August*, Faulkner challenges society's intolerance for racial ambiguity. Society's organizing principle or design demands that people be racially classified to ensure the continuance of white superiority for those of pure white ancestry and black inferiority for those with even a trace of black heritage. Faulkner explores the challenges to the children of miscegenation by investigating characters who pass and those who refuse to, even though their lives would likely improve by living as white. If the real or imagined explanations of the narrators are to be believed, both Eulalia Bon and her son Charles pass as white. They are punished as imposters: Eulalia and Bon are abandoned by Sutpen when he learns of her black blood; further, Bon's father refuses to recognize him as his son. They appear in stark contrast to the rewards of wealth and position that Sutpen receives as a self-made white man with an undisclosed background.²⁶ Faulkner places the abandoned mother and son in New Orleans where he is

raised as a white man. In a conversation with UVA students, Faulkner explained that Bon's growing up in the Indies and New Orleans rendered his and his mother's race unimportant since they were wealthy and could have called themselves Creoles "whether she had Negro blood along with the French or not" (UVA Conversations, May 8, 1958). In fact, Bon mimics the prosperous young white male's tradition of keeping an octoroon.²⁷ He explains to Henry: "We – the thousand, the white men – made them, created and produced them; we even made the laws which declare that one eighth of a specified kind of blood shall outweigh seven eighths of another kind" (*Absalom* 91). Although Bon is referring to octoroons, the passage serves as a more general explanation of miscegenation in two ways: as an admission that white males are responsible for producing people of mixed blood and that they have created the laws which designate any drop of black blood as the determinant of race. Clearly, Bon, the son of a mixed-race mother, is passing as white as one of the thousand white men. He and his octoroon have a "sixteenth part negro son" (*Absalom* 80), Charles Etienne de Saint Valery Bon, himself a child of miscegenation. Faulkner tests the racial identification requirement with this son whose heritage is predominately white with only a trace of black.

Southern society's requirement for identification with either the black or white race provokes questions for both the individual born of a mixed race relationship and the confused community. Faulkner exposes the conflicted lives of the offspring, demanding that we understand their torment. A life-time of despair and bitterness awaits the individual, especially one who looks white such as Charles Etienne, this son of a woman who has one-eighth black blood and a man who likely has a lesser amount, if any. In New Orleans, he is brought up by his parents as white; however, when he arrives in

Mississippi, with its polarized racial environment, he soon learns that he cannot live as white within a household that knows his mother's origin. Through Etienne's identity change with his shift in location of a few hundred miles, Faulkner illustrates the contingent nature of racial categories. Additionally, just as he showed the separation and rank of the races by the upper and lower level sleeping arrangements of half-sisters Judith and Clytie, Faulkner again emphasizes the requirements of a society that demands racial absolutes. Sleeping on a trundle bed between Judith in her bed and Clytie on her floor pallet, Etienne wonders in despair where he fits. Judith and Clytie lie awake thinking: "Through no fault nor willing of your own you should be [in this bed with me], and you are not down here on this pallet floor with me, where through no fault nor willing of your own you must and will be" (*Absalom* 161). Law and custom will not permit the women to choose Etienne's position. He seems to be caught in an undefined "medial racial, social and filial space" (Urgo and Polk 102). Thus, as hard as Clytie scrubs him "to wash away the smooth faint olive tinge from his face," she cannot erase the presence of black blood with its social and family implications (*Absalom* 161).

Once he surfaces as a young man from the protection of Sutpen's Hundred, Etienne appears racially ambiguous to himself and the community. His emergence sets off a bout of fighting with both blacks and whites as he searches for racial clarity. A Jefferson justice who first believes he is white demands, "What are you? Who and where did you come from?" (*Absalom* 165), an echo of the community's confusion over Joe Christmas, who they said "never acted like either a nigger or a white man" (*Light* 350). Although it is a shocked stranger who is confused by his racial classification, it could easily be Charles Etienne asking the same questions of himself, along with one more.

Why can I not just be myself without a category of race? Because his appearance will allow him to pass as white, General Compson urges him to disappear to another part of the country: “Whatever you are, once you are among strangers . . . you can be whatever you will” (*Absalom* 165). In this, Faulkner gives Etienne an option to pass as white or black. In the culture of the South, however, Faulkner’s character understands that he has no choice, for his one drop of black blood is the same as being black. Just as Christmas dons the black woman’s brogans to signal his decision to remove his racial uncertainty, Etienne returns to Sutpen’s Hundred with a “coal black and ape-like woman” as his legal wife. He has chosen blackness, but even his choice does not satisfy a community who is perplexed by his white appearance. During his brief adult life, he continues to taunt both the black and white community, using his alliance with his ape-like wife to engender reactions among them that range from disgust to anger and violence. General Compson’s verdict about this child of miscegenation seems to speak for Faulkner’s view that society imposes an impossible life on such people: “Better that he were dead, better that he had never lived” (*Absalom* 166). In the bigoted southern society of Jefferson, racial ambiguity caused by miscegenation is a threat to the hierarchical positions of the races, and it cannot be tolerated. Its victims, such as light-skinned, mixed-race Charles Etienne, are doomed.

Miscegenation challenges notions of racial superiority in society, but it also calls into question the meaning of family and kinship. The definition of family is unclear in a culture that requires strict racial distinction, but which is continuously being altered by the presence of miscegenation over generations (Sollors 334). Faulkner provides multiple instances of relatives who are detached by law and culture because of their unequal blood. Marriages are threatened; siblings do not recognize each other. For example, from

just the first two generations of Sutpens, several separations exist: husband Thomas Sutpen from wife Eulalia Bon; father Thomas Sutpen from son Charles Bon and slave daughter Clytie Sutpen; brother Henry Sutpen from brother Charles Bon and sister Clytie Sutpen; sister Judith Sutpen from sister Clytie Sutpen and brother Charles Bon. Within these disjointed relationships, two of them help explain the complexity of families in the South. The first illustrates the consequences to the Sutpen family for the continued denial of miscegenation. A father denies parentage to his son because he may have a hint of black blood. This stain precludes his participation in the father's dynasty, which requires white purity under the southern aristocratic code. This rejection of his own flesh and blood becomes the central flaw in Sutpen's grand design, and ultimately, it takes down his dynasty (Sollors 330).²⁸ Sutpen feels his "house, position, posterity and all – come down like it had been built out of smoke," but he attributes the downfall to some type of legal mistake, "that mistake which he could not discover himself" (*Absalom* 215). This is similar to the South declaring protection of states' rights rather than defense of the institution of slavery as its reason for going to war. Never does he consider as a factor in his ruin the refusal to recognize his mixed-race son, Charles Bon, for he only sees Bon as the black man who will wreck his design (Kartiganer 299). In fact, that acknowledgement is all Bon wanted from him, never expecting to be a beneficiary of Sutpen's design, according to the imaginings of Quentin and Shreve. A scrap of paper saying, "I am your father," or one word "Charles," or "a lock of his hair or a paring from his fingernail" would suffice as recognition for Bon, which Sutpen fails to give (*Absalom* 261). Faulkner may have chosen hair and fingernails since they were often used as racial indicators and connected to the theme of passing in literature (Sollors 151).²⁹ In a UVA classroom

discussion, Faulkner said that “acknowledg[ing] Bon as his son would have destroyed the very dream, the drive, which had compelled [Sutpen] to go through hardship” (UVA Conversations, May 8, 1958). Under the southern prescription for racial purity, a black son’s participation in a white family was simply not an option.

A second example of an altered meaning of kinship involves the idea that miscegenation is more onerous than incest. Faulkner illustrates this preposterous notion in an imaginary scenario devised by Quentin and Shreve. Bon and Henry plan for Bon to marry Judith until Henry learns from Sutpen that Bon is not only his half-brother, but also that he is of mixed race. Bon has come to understand the South and the Sutpens, and he challenges Henry: “So it’s the miscegenation, not the incest, which you can’t bear” (*Absalom* 285, Railton 49-50). Henry first refuses to kill him because, “You are my brother,” to which Bon responds: “No I’m not. I’m the nigger that’s going to sleep with your sister” (*Absalom* 286).³⁰ Henry rationalizes the prospect of Judith committing incest since kings have done it, but he cannot tolerate Judith committing miscegenation (Roberts 36).³¹ In the South’s code, Henry must kill his brother to stop him from marrying their sister, for racial purity of the Sutpen line and by extension, in the South, must be maintained above all else as the central factor of its cultural design. Miscegenation has forced brother to kill brother; it has also made the sister a widow before she is married and a spinster at age twenty-four. Faulkner shows that the “debacle of miscegenation” forces men and women into unbearable roles and twists family relationships into unrecognizable and immoral states (Sundquist 124).

This “debacle of miscegenation” brings an end to Sutpen’s design as it brought about the collapse of the South. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner explores the curse of

miscegenation as it reinforces and expands the race and class system, separates families from each other, and complicates racial identification in a culture that demands clarity. Although the patriarchal culture as it pertains to women is not, by itself, what destroys Sutpen's design or the South, Faulkner criticizes the system that divests women of any power to control their own lives. As such, he includes women as victims of the primarily male-driven miscegenation, for their marriages, families and sexual identities are harmed by it. Finally, since he refuses to recognize his son because of his tainted blood, it is fitting that Sutpen, the self-made plantation owner of Sutpen's Hundred, will never understand why his design has collapsed, for he never comprehended that his vision was "falsely grounded."

‘Aliens in Their Midst’: Joe and Joanna, the Outcasts of *Light in August*

The South’s race-based social and economic patriarchy proved impossible to sustain, as Faulkner illustrated in the destruction of Sutpen’s design in *Absalom, Absalom!* The racial barrier that was breached through miscegenation could not be repaired, try as southern white men would through the imposition of decades of legal and cultural prohibitions. Yet, the effort to sustain white superiority and racial purity continued, with tragic consequences for black and mixed-race people. As we saw earlier in the historical records of Ida B. Wells-Barnett’s investigation of lynching in Georgia and Myrta Lockett Avery’s writings, one such outcome was the mania over black men who became the focus of the whites’ determination to maintain the racial hierarchy. White hysteria projected black men as sexual beasts and rapists of innocent white women, or as Charles Bon assured Henry Sutpen: “I am the nigger that’s going to sleep with your [white] sister” (*Absalom* 286). Faulkner exposes the white man’s fear that white women might desire sexual relations with black men. He focuses on this sexual taboo from multiple angles, and in doing so he disputes the notion that “Romeo and Juliet” can be kept apart. He also shows, however, why their being together in the racist South is “a mistake and an error” (UVA Conversations, April 13, 1957). Thus, in *Light in August*, a father murders his white daughter’s supposedly mixed-race lover; a purportedly mixed-race child is snatched from his family and abandoned in an orphanage; a man of indistinct racial identity lives with white and black women; and, as a white person, the same man “rapes” a white woman and then over the course of their three-year affair, he becomes her black lover before he is castrated and murdered for it by the white community.

Another outcome of the furor to maintain the racial hierarchy was southern society's insistence on clear racial identity. In both *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Light in August*, Faulkner uncovers the challenges to the individual and community when racial clarity is elusive. Just as he did with father and son, Charles Bon and Charles Etienne, in *Light in August* Faulkner emphasizes the futility of a person in the South trying to disavow even the slightest trace of black blood, for by law and cultural mandate, one drop of black blood completely erases all white ancestry. Furthermore, merely the suggestion of mixed heritage equates to blackness in the racially-paranoid Jefferson, Mississippi. Faulkner reveals the impact of the absence of racial clarity on his characters, especially Joe Christmas, who believes he has been "hunted [as black] by white men . . . for thirty years," even though he has lived his life primarily as a white man (*Light* 331). Christmas has repeatedly run from and toward a black identity but, in reality, his fate within society was sealed by his grandfather's dubious belief in Christmas's father's black blood before he was born. As Faulkner illustrates in Christmas, the sociological and psychological pressures on the victim of miscegenation make him an outsider and create behaviors in him that can demean and destroy others.

Just as he did with the females in the patriarchal world of *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner examines the challenges to women in a social order that demands rigid gender definition along with strict racial conformity. Many decades after the Civil War, southern women remained subservient to men and were relegated to their expected domestic roles as wives and mothers, unlike some northern women who had begun to experience personal freedoms extraneous to the male-dominated families. In *Light in August*, Faulkner introduces Joanna Burden as an illustration of the pressures the patriarchy

places on a woman living in the South who rebels against convention. As Christmas's racial ambiguity makes him a threat to the Jefferson community, Joanna Burden's nonconformity to the societal classifications of gender makes her a menace. Her man-like characteristics defy traditional male-female definition so that she disrupts the patriarchy by not having a clear-cut female identity. Along with her reviled northern heritage and patronage of blacks, her break from conventional femininity makes her an outsider. The world of 1930s Mississippi, argues Faulkner, will not tolerate indefinitely noncompliance in any woman, "foreign" or otherwise; nor will the community relinquish its requirements for strict racial identity in an individual. These nonconformists must be punished as threats, for in both cases they cause instability in the hierarchy, which jeopardizes the survival of the white patriarchy.

* * *

Southern society in 1932 requires a racial identity, and it will not permit a person to be a split-self, to be both black and white. A person may be mixed race as a product of miscegenation, but then, by virtue of having a drop of black blood, he is considered black. As an example of this requirement and its impact on the individual, Faulkner captures Christmas's progression of thought as he struggles to understand his predicament about his identity with the refrain, "all I wanted." The phrase appears three times as he ponders his plight, and it culminates in his comprehension that he wanted to be considered just a man without race as a consideration. The notion first occurs hours before he kills Joanna Burden. Christmas's, "All I wanted was peace" (*Light* 112), in this case is the narrator's interpretation of Joe's unconscious thought, according to Hugh Ruppersburg in his commentary on the novel (5). Christmas has rejected Burden's plan

for him to take the identity of a black man, which is abhorrent to him as a white racist: “To tell niggers that I am a nigger too” (*Light* 277). Likewise, although he has revealed to people, such as Bobbie, other prostitutes and Joe Brown, his possible black blood, the telling has always been on his terms and usually for purposes of manipulation. He also views Burden’s command to make him pray with her as an attempt to dominate him and even submit to the “ultimate patriarch,” according to critic Doreen Fowler in “Joe Christmas and Womanshenegro” (157). The narrator is suggesting that Christmas really just wanted to be left alone in peace, while Christmas more specifically reasons that he is resisting any domination over himself, including pressure to accept blackness.

The next reflection represents Christmas’s conscious thought that he wanted the identity and life of a normal white man: “‘That’s all I wanted,’ he thought. ‘That don’t seem like a whole lot to ask’” (*Light* 115). At this point in the narration, he has just fled in panic from Freedman Town for the safety of a white neighborhood. He has observed two white couples playing cards on the porch. His comment reflects a longing for a white man’s normalcy: friends, family, a house with a porch for evening entertaining with his wife and friends. He is fooling himself, however, for he chose the life of an outsider and wanderer who disdains the mainstream. Given his appearance and upbringing as a white man, he could easily have “passed” and remained firmly in white society, ignoring what was only rumored, and not factual presence of black blood. Again, he is grappling to understand himself, and, at this point, he believes a white man’s racial identity would have satisfied him.

Clarity finally comes to Christmas in the third consideration of “all I wanted,” which occurs after he kills Burden. He has recently donned a black woman’s husband’s

brogans, which represents his forced acceptance of a black identity. He consciously muses: “‘That was all I wanted,’ he thinks, in a quiet and slow amazement. ‘That was all, for thirty years. That didn’t seem to be a whole lot to ask in thirty years’” (*Light* 331). Even though he has now settled for a black identity, his thought does not reflect a new awareness of a life-long desire to be black. Rather, it reveals his discovery that what he really wanted was the freedom to be himself.³² In the southern world at that time, however, categorization as either black or white is required. Ultimately, Christmas must choose or, at least, acquiesce to one racial category.

In Christmas, Faulkner has created a man who is race-obsessed and boils with self-hatred, a condition that society has forced on him. Critic André Bleikasten argues that Christmas has fought against himself because as a white racist, he despises his possible blackness, and as a black man, he hates the whites who represent the controlling force in society (83). Yet, the conditions of his birth make it impossible for Christmas to resolve the dilemma of his racial identity.³³ In an April 13, 1957 conversation with UVA students, Faulkner explained: “[Christmas] didn’t know what he was, and so he was nothing. He deliberately evicted himself from the human race because he didn’t know which he was . . . and there was no way possible in life for him to find out” (UVA Conversations). Nevertheless, Christmas is required to be something, for “evicting himself from the human race,” does not lessen Christmas’s challenge to society. To the contrary, it deepens the threat to a community that is constructed by clear divisions and judgments: white and male are all things positive; black and female are the opposite (Bleikasten 96). Established societal order is maintained through strict conformity to the constructions. Thus, with Christmas, citizens are angry because there is no visible trace of

his blackness. He looks like a white man, but, “he never acted like either a nigger or a white man . . . it was like he never even knew he was a murderer, let alone a nigger too” (*Light* 350). He is not acting like they expect a black man to act – “skulking and hiding in the woods, muddy and dirty and running” (*Light* 350). Instead, he saunters down the street, looking and acting like a white man with new clothes and a cleanly shaven face. They are both confused and infuriated because he must be and act black or white according to their definitions. This southern society will not permit him to create his own, distinctive self without race as a factor. Rather, it demands racial clarity, because the strict notions of race on which it is based will otherwise break down, and society as they know it will crumble if he remains ambiguous (Bleikasten 98).

Faulkner embodies in Christmas the flaws of a society that assesses value based on absolute racial and gender definitions. He has been a perpetrator of the absolutes as a means of self-preservation resulting in a thirty-year repudiation of the weak end of society, females and blacks. Throughout his life, he has been determined to affiliate with those in power – white, adult and male – which to him requires that he reject the opposite, that is, those who are not in control – women, children and blacks (Fowler 147-148). In Jefferson society, someone commands while the other obeys, and the white man’s traits of “aggression, brutality, willfulness and imperviousness are valued and emulated” (Fowler 147-148). Beginning with his life at the McEachern’s, Christmas models those traits as he experiences them in his foster father with whom he wages his own thirteen-year battle for power. Bowing to McEachern’s demands represents subjugation to Christmas, and that is a weak trait associated with the females he rejects. The traits that belong to women lack value in Jefferson society, and he battles to suppress

them in himself. Furthermore, any suggestion of “gentleness, tenderness, sensitivity, instinctiveness, a desire to nurture and vulnerability” are rejected by him (Fowler 147-148). His victimization at an early age by his grandfather, the dietician and McEachern has taught him that he must not show vulnerability. In fact, in order to protect himself and survive in the patriarchal world, he reasons he must do the opposite. Thus, rather than feel compassion for the belittled, demeaned and victimized Mrs. McEachern, Christmas learns to exercise his own brand of control over her by rejecting her kindnesses to him. For example, in disobedience to her husband and at her peril, she sneaks him food. Secretly, she offers him money. Christmas responds by throwing the food on the floor, and he only devours it after Mrs. McEachern has gone. Likewise, he later steals the money that she earlier offered to him. Christmas will do things only on his terms like his male role model, McEachern, who epitomizes the harsh male creed of the white patriarch. He quickly learns to despise the weakness of women, and vowing never to become subjugated like them, he learns to hate their vulnerability and, by extension, them.

Along with Christmas’s repudiation of women is his hatred of blacks, which is born of the racial prejudice of his upbringing and culture. Like women, blacks exist in a state of subjugation, the opposite of the desirable, dominant position of white men. Faulkner coined a term, “womanshenegro,” which is a composite of women and blacks. It represents “some element common to both woman and Negro” that infuriates and petrifies Christmas (Fowler 156-157). As a power ploy and survival strategy, Christmas is wholeheartedly committed to the image of total and “impenetrable” maleness, in part, for fear that he is part black with potential for subjugation, that state representing women and blacks, according to Fowler (151). It causes him to lash out at the young, black

prostitute in fear, disgust and a belief that he will be totally denigrated if he has sex with her, for a black woman is the most vilified and suppressed of all people. Even though he suspects he has a taint of black blood, as a member of its ruling faction, he scorns and preys on society's weak elements, blacks and women, as if to prove his dominance and compensate for his suspicious, impure heritage. It has been his means for self-preservation as a human being.

Negative depictions of blackness abound in *Light in August*, and Faulkner employs them as Christmas is running for his life to emphasize his imminent destruction. In trading his white man's shoes for a black woman's husband's "crude . . . shapeless" black brogans, he allows "the immolation which [he] has resisted all his life" to overtake him (*Light* 331, Fowler 157). He recognizes that blackness has finally claimed him, and he has no alternative but to accept it. By accepting blackness, he has acknowledged his death. That which he earlier denied, he now accepts. For example, the Negro smell of the shoes no longer repels him. In fact, he acknowledges it whereas, in the past, he tried to breathe in the "black odor" only for his white persona to repulse it with "physical outrage and spiritual denial" (*Light* 225, 226). Too, only hours earlier, he ran in terror from the "hot, wet" Negro smells for the security of the "cold hard air of white people" (*Light* 115). As exemplified in the Freedman Town scene, all his life Christmas has been running from the "thick black pit," the "black hollow . . . that might have been the original quarry, the abyss itself" (*Light* 114-116). Now, he muses that he is being hunted "at last into the black abyss," it will "drown him," and his thirty-year fight for self-preservation will end in his death (*Light* 331). All his life, he has defined himself. He has been a split-self, refusing to pigeonhole himself as purely white or black. Now, however,

after killing a white woman and being rumored to be mixed-blooded, he is ensnared by the standards of the southern white male power system to which he has so rigorously subscribed. The black man will have to be killed and maimed for his crime against a white woman. In 1932 Jefferson, society's rules about race are fixed. Christmas's reluctant conformity to its demands means he has lost his thirty-year fight for self-preservation. By acknowledging or, at least, accepting a black identity, he consents to a horrific end, which he understands is the only one available to a man in his situation in his South.

* * *

As discussed, in the character of Joe Christmas, Faulkner incorporates two threatening aspects of the black man in 1930s South: miscegenation, with its assurance of racial indistinctness, and sexuality, with its menace to white women. Just as Christmas provokes outrage for his sexuality and non-conformance to strict racial constructions, Joanna Burden engenders disapproval for her association with blackness and Yankees. In Burden, Faulkner presents a character, who like Joe is trying to "break free of the boundaries of race, gender, class and sexuality" (Roberts 172). As with Christmas's race, however, non-conformity in a female will not be tolerated by Jefferson society.

Memories of the Civil War and its aftermath remain fresh in the minds and lives of the citizens of Jefferson, for like the rest of the South, their way of life was wrenched from them when the North won the war. Hostility to anything foreign remains, and an early passage establishes the town's view of Joanna Burden and her home: "But it still lingers about her and about the place: something dark and outlandish and threatful, even though she is but a woman and but the descendant of them whom the ancestors of the

town had reason (or thought they had) to hate and dread” (*Light* 47). There is a lasting notion of menace that “lingers,” especially as it refers to that which is strange or alien to the culture of Jefferson. In the novel’s present-day, townspeople speculate about “outlandish” and “threatful” activities at the Burden plantation involving “queer relations” with blacks (*Light* 46, 47). The Yankee Burden family’s past efforts involved helping newly-freed blacks to vote. In the 1930s, however, along with Joanna Burden’s support of black survival and advancement comes a hint of something sexual and powerful.

As Mary Chesnut protested in her diary, Old South culture gave all control and sexual freedom to white men so that their dependent women were powerless to prevent male sexual relations with slave women. After the emancipation of slaves, white men were fearful that their women might become attracted to or accessible to black males. No tolerance for black Romeo and white Juliet existed, therefore, as revealed by the plethora of anti-miscegenation laws to ensure racial separation as well as the lynching of black men to “protect” white women. As it was in the Old South, in 1930s Jefferson, any white female-black male relationship would be considered “outlandish” and a threat to male superiority, racial supremacy and racial purity, a condition to which white Jeffersonians cling (*Light* 47). Thus, in Faulkner’s fiction, the community is naturally uneasy about Burden’s “queer relations,” which alludes to her suspected sexual involvement with black men and more recently includes racially ambiguous Christmas, who lives on her property. Hatred and “dread” of anything foreign, including her suspected racial proclivities, retains its hold on the people of Jefferson. Despite Burden being “but a woman” and “but

the descendant” rather than the abolitionist Yankee male relative, therefore, she persists as a threat to the town and its way of life (*Light* 47).

Like we saw in southern women’s diaries and as illustrated in *Absalom, Absalom!*, the white male-centered social order relegates the female to the inferior position. It sets the standard and limits her roles as dependent wife and mother. It is no wonder that Burden, spinster, independent female and advocate of blacks, is shunned. Husbands will not allow their wives to call on her; in fact, no one in town has entered her house. First of all, her position on and supportive work with blacks make her a pariah in the community. She has inherited her father and grandfather’s brand of abolitionism, an automatic taboo in the white South. Both were fervent abolitionists and fanatical about slavery which they saw as the joint curse of the white and black races, according to critic Harold Hungerford (189-190). As a child, Joanna’s father preaches to her that according to God’s plan, the black race is “doomed and cursed to be forever and ever a part of the white man’s doom and curse” (*Light* 252). Nightmares plague her as her father assures her that she will never escape the curse. Instead, “[She] must struggle, rise. But in order to rise, you must raise the shadow with you. But you can never lift it to your level” (*Light* 253). In other words, while her father charged her with dedication to helping blacks to expiate the sin, their version of abolitionism does not include equality of the blacks. For Joanna, then, her inheritance of guilt means a life of philanthropy toward blacks; however, she never believes in or hopes for their true equality with the white race. Even so, in accepting the dictates of her heritage she acquiesces to spinsterhood, forgoing the traditional woman’s life of family and children. Her estrangement from the townspeople for her foreignness, her exclusive attention to the well-being of the black families around her home, and her

energies with a black college preclude normal attachments with a southern white man.

Like the relic spinster Rosa Coldfield, Burden is called a poor barren woman; indeed, her hope for pregnancy turns out to be menopause.

As miscegenation has disrupted the racial order, women stretch the boundaries of the patriarchy, both with destructive results. In addition to her support of blacks, Burden's failing is that she seems to "undercut gender differentiation," according to critic Deborah Clarke (403), for she acts and appears masculine in a society that values tradition, although she can become feminine in her sexuality. She is described as having "almost [a] manlike face and possessing "mantrained muscles" and a "mantrained habit of thinking" (*Light* 266, 235). Those descriptions fit with the image of a male who manages his own life and business affairs. Christmas, the misogynist, is confused by but admires her "strength and fortitude of a man" (*Light* 234). Even her initial responses to Christmas's forced intercourse are described as "hard, untearful and unselfpitying and almost manlike yielding of that surrender," and he thinks she almost seemed like the man with himself as the woman (*Light* 234). If Christmas's impressions are accurate, they do not reflect the reactions of a typical woman who has just been violated. In stretching the boundaries, she "switches back and forth between her sexual identities," for she also succumbs to naked lust in phase two of her relationship with Christmas (Bleikasten 91). Too, she imagines and hopes for a pregnancy, which is a traditional female expectation for fulfillment as a woman. She is man-like in her power and independence, but she is sometimes feminine in her sexuality. However, this society will not permit either the nontraditional woman or the ambiguity, for it threatens the established order (Bleikasten 97).

The pressures of the societal structure will prevail. Thus, as Christmas was destroyed for his nonconformity with racial definition, Burden must be forced back into the accepted category of womanhood.³⁴ How it comes about, though, involves the most frightening of old southern beliefs that all black men want to rape white women. Burden's suspected "queer relations" with black men subvert a basic southern tenet that makes the white woman chaste and innocent while the black man is potently sexual.³⁵ It is only through her death that she becomes a "stereotypical wronged white woman" who has been murdered and assumed to have been raped by a black man (Clarke 406), which is "perhaps the most profound psychic assault on the Southern sense of integrity" (Roberts 169). After a life of having been marginalized as a spinster and viewed as an enemy in her place of birth because of her foreignness, unnatural beliefs and masculine ways, in death she is integrated into the community. Not only is the threat of miscegenation extinguished, but the community's anxiety about a white woman desiring a black man is proved false. Finally, in her death, she becomes a respectable southern white woman, for "the community's anti-abolitionist sentiments are forgotten and completely engulfed in racial hysteria" (Sundquist 82). Once more, society's rigid standards triumph over the individual, and the hierarchies of race and gender are stabilized.

In *Light in August*, Faulkner depicts the instability of the categories of white and black, yet at the novel's conclusion, the racial hierarchy seems to be stabilized. In truth, however, it remains vulnerable to "hidden blackness" and "a whole congeries of aliens in their midst," who do not fit a racial formula, according to historian Joel Williamson (qtd. in Al-Barhow 57). As Faulkner demonstrated with the impossibility of Sutpen's design in

Absalom, Absalom!, miscegenation has irrevocably undermined the racial purity required for the white patriarchal society to remain intact. Its pointless resolve to uphold the fictional racial boundaries, Faulkner tells us, will continue to inflict damage on many people.

In *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Light in August*, Faulkner reconstructs through his imagination a picture of southern culture with unresolved issues from its past, especially about race, that continued to challenge the region in his own life time. Joanna Burden's father warns her about the white man's racial inheritance -- the black race is the "white man's doom and curse for its sins" (*Light* 252-253) -- that she must strive to redress. As he does with Joanna's lifelong exertions on behalf of blacks, or Joe Christmas's struggle to find a place, that is, racial identification in the world, Faulkner portrays white and black men and women struggling to live within manufactured racial constructions that are faulty "creations of the white man" (Warren, *Faulkner* 259), and being harmed along the way. In a culture that requires color precision, the miscegenation that has blurred color lines makes outcasts of those who are unidentifiable. The boundaries for gender are also inherited creations of the omnipotent white male of the past, and Faulkner presents women as trapped, often miserably, within the prescribed precepts of southern womanhood. In the next chapter, Kate Chopin also considers the themes of society's intolerance for those who do not fit within its strict racial and gender definitions.

Chapter Three

Fits and Misfits in the Southern World of Kate Chopin's Fiction

Introduction

Writing thirty to forty years before Faulkner penned *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, Kate Chopin also tackled the complexities of race and gender in a largely patriarchal white society of the 1890s. Her critics suggested she often depicted life as she saw it, and she had “a habit, too, of using Louisiana events for inspiration,” according to her biographer Emily Toth (139).³⁶ Like Faulkner's ancestors, she was raised in a slave-holding family whose sympathies lay with the Confederacy in the Civil War. Too, both of their lives encompassed a time of great social, economic and cultural change in the country and the South, which influenced their writing. When Chopin died in 1904 at age 54, just seven years after Faulkner's birth, she had experienced the Civil War, the emancipation of slaves, Reconstruction, Jim Crow laws, industrialization and women starting to seek personal freedom and independence from the traditional confines of a patriarchal order. Her exposure to the unique southern racial hierarchy, for example, began early in her life. Born into a family that owned slaves, like many elite southern children, she had a mammy and also shared her home with two light-skinned little girls who were suspected to be the mixed-race children of her father (Toth 7). These realities may have surfaced in “Désirée's Baby” with Désirée's husband Armand Aubigny possibly having fathered his slave La Blanche's children. Or, perhaps she saw her mammy Louise in the “coal black” nursemaid Marie Louise in *At Fault*. Kate's mammy Louise abandoned her during the Civil War, and just like the women whose diaries recounted the desertion of their slaves, Kate's mother Eliza wrote to her uncle during the

war: “My negroes are leaving me[;] old Louise ran off a few days ago, I suppose the rest will follow soon” (Toth 11). Thérèse LeFirme’s childhood mammy Marie Louise also left her, but she departed by drowning in *At Fault*, and years after she had been declared a free woman. The intent with those examples is not to imply direct parallels; rather, it is to acknowledge Chopin’s tendency to depict life as she saw it, including in her revelations about race and gender in the South.

As with race, Chopin’s unique experience with the women of her family and wide circle of female associates also informed her writing. She came from a heritage of strong women who capably handled their own financial and personal affairs, including fending for themselves without male support or protection during the Civil War. At home with her mother and grandmother or at school with nuns who saw to it that she learned French, history and laboratory science along with the prescribed needlework, she was educated and mentored by women. Her sympathies as well as her loyalties often seemed to lie with other women, at least as it is evidenced in her writing (Toth 19-22). For example, in *The Awakening*, after months of longing for Robert Lebrun and finally having the opportunity to be with him, Edna Pontellier leaves him to comfort her friend Adèle Ratignolle, who is giving birth to another child. Her sympathies with women did not preclude her from satirizing them, such as in her portrayal of Mrs. Belle Worthington in *At Fault*, “who not only favors drinking, but is also loud and crude and a deliberate religious hypocrite: she goes to mass and confession only to keep ‘on the safe side’” (Toth 115).³⁷ More often, however, Chopin’s female characters were favorably drawn, and she frequently placed the intelligent, probing conversations in the mouths of her female characters, such as the

talks between Edna and Mademoiselle Reisz, while most men in *The Awakening* seemed to either bark orders or flirt (Toth 24).

It was not so much that Chopin was critical of males, although Armand is cruelly heartless in “Désirée’s Baby” and David Hosmer in *At Fault* states: “There’s no brute so brutal as man” (*At Fault* 86). Rather, she chafed at the confines of the traditional white male world, which often made women powerless to direct their lives and also denied them the opportunity for self-expression. That did not translate, however, into a feminist viewpoint, contrary to what some critics have argued.³⁸ She was very interested in women’s freedom as “the freedom to explore ideas” but also as “a matter of spirit, soul, character of living your life within the constraints that the world makes [or] your God offers you,” according to critic Elizabeth Fox-Genovese (2). Biographer Per Seyersted suggested her works are illustrations “of woman’s right to be herself, to be individual and independent whether she wants to be weak or strong, a nest maker or a soaring bird” (*Awakening*, “Realists” 207). Chopin’s notions of personal freedom are most prominently displayed in *The Awakening* through the diversity of her female characters. Mademoiselle Reisz has made her choice to be the independent artist, and Adèle freely embraces the conventional role of mother woman. It is Edna, though, who desires freedom and abandons her family to escape the constraints of the traditional life that she had already chosen.³⁹ For this, reviewers condemned *The Awakening* for its unpleasantness, unseemliness and vulgarity related to Edna’s sexual explorations (*Awakening*, “Contemporary Reviews” 166-169), and they blasted the book as “too strong drink for moral babes” (Toth and Seyersted 296). Also present in reviewers’ comments was veiled intolerance for the heroine’s denial of family and the patriarch as the center and

commander of a woman's life. In a statement to *Book News*, Chopin explained her novel: "I never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnation as she did. If I had had the slightest intimation of such a thing I would have excluded her from the company. But when I found out what she was up to, the play was half over and it was then too late" (Toth and Seyersted 296). In this way, Chopin expressed her own personal need for self-expression and defended Edna's and her right to it, critics be damned.

In the three works discussed in this chapter – "Désirée's Baby," *At Fault* and *The Awakening* – we will see how Chopin uses her characters to expose the challenges for women in varied settings and periods of cultural evolution. "Désirée's Baby" takes place on an antebellum Louisiana plantation and shows the hopelessness of a woman's life when a man robs her of her place as wife and mother in the world he controls. *At Fault* is set in 1881 on a plantation in northwest Louisiana and the city of St. Louis. In this post-Reconstruction period, Chopin allows a woman to successfully participate in the future as long as she can make the adjustments to the modernism of industrialization as it encroaches on her agricultural world. *The Awakening* occurs in New Orleans in the 1890s within the conservative French Creole culture. As touched on previously, Chopin pits a woman who demands the personal freedom to find herself against the strict requirements of the traditional patriarchy. In Edna's case, her refusal to adhere to the rules of the current society, or "to live as the inessential adjunct to a man," (Seyersted, "Introduction" 28), dooms her. Common to each period, though, is the patriarchy, the controlling force of society through which the women must navigate. Chopin reveals their varying degrees

of success as they are bullied by traditions, handicapped by stale viewpoints or are simply out of step with the times.

Just like she does with women in the patriarchal South, Chopin exposes the difficulties of living in a society that requires adherence to strict racial hierarchies and customs, irrespective of the pervasiveness of white-male promulgated miscegenation. As indicated earlier, Chopin lived during the slave system as well as in its demise, which provided her with a clear vantage point for considering its impact on people and society. While Faulkner tried to understand and consistently explored in his writing the themes of slavery, racism and miscegenation as the South's curse, in these three works, Chopin based the prominence on racial issues as a function of each setting. In "Désirée's Baby," white racial purity is required by law and culture among the slave-holding plantation elite. Yet, as we saw in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, the system of slavery which permits miscegenation also blurs racial divisions, and in doing so, destroys black and white families. Just as Thomas Sutpen evicts his possibly mixed-race wife from his life "through no fault of her own" (*Absalom* 194), Armand discards supposedly mixed-race Désirée even though she brought "unconscious injury" to him ("Désirée's Baby" 244). On its surface in *At Fault*, loyal black servants are presented as a function of a successful post-slavery plantation. Outbursts of racial unrest surface and are resolved. Although Chopin does not directly present racism as an impediment to her theme of progress through the marriage of the agrarian and industrial worlds, there remains a sense that the threat of racial violence is close to the surface. In the racially-mixed society of New Orleans that is the setting for *The Awakening*, Chopin uses race as an enabler for Edna's personal explorations. Her racial biases as an inheritance of her class, however, become

an impediment to her personal progress as an individual. In this discussion of the three works, then, I argue that Chopin depicts the prevailing culture, in this case the white male patriarchy, with its lock on power and racial construction, as directing the course of people's lives, swallowing up those who are misfits and rewarding others who are able to adjust.

The White Man's 'Unconscious Injury' or Casual Cruelty in "Désirée's Baby"

Kate Chopin confronts both the patriarchal society and racial attitudes of antebellum South in "Désirée's Baby." If race hovers in the background of some of her works, such as *The Awakening*, the tragic and cruel consequences of slavery, racism and miscegenation are on full display in her short story. With her husband Armand Aubigny's answer to Désirée's anguished plea to help her understand their child's appearance: "That the child is not white; it means that you are not white" ("Désirée's Baby" 243), Chopin summarizes the central factor of race in the antebellum South. Irrespective of the predominance of blood relatives of white origin or familial bonds, race always prevails. Werner Sollors, in his discussion of racial identity in the United States put it this way: "The racial principle of descent . . . was that a 'white' parent (male or female) might generate a 'black' or 'white' child, but the 'black' parent (male or female) could generate only 'black' (43). Furthermore, whiteness and freedom were symbolically linked as were blackness, including interracial identity, and slavery (Sollors 43). Thus, Armand's accusation that "the child" . . . and "you are not white" has explosive implications for Désirée, Armand and their baby, just as it did for actual antebellum southern families.

To begin with, Chopin constructs a situation by which racially-drawn laws of the South and, specifically Louisiana, command the destruction of a presumed elite white family. If the laws are followed, supposedly "not white" Désirée and their mixed-race child must be excised, for they cannot legally be an official part of the white Aubigny family legacy, or in the parlance of Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!*, a function of his family design. In 1800s Louisiana, racial laws were in place that had evolved from its background as a French and Spanish colony. Through the Louisiana Civil Code of 1825,

measures were adopted to maintain the racial hierarchy of white superiority and also to protect the property of white heirs against siblings of color, according to Michelle Brattain in her study of racial definition in Louisiana (629-630).⁴⁰ Thus, in a continuance of the 1808 Louisiana Civil Code, marriages between slaves, free persons of color and whites were prohibited. By law, then, Armand can and should denounce his wife and child for their taint of blackness, thereby destroying an intact family due to the legacy of miscegenation.

Setting aside the legal prohibitions of a mixed race family, Chopin exposes the emotional cruelty of miscegenation with its culturally-imposed ban on blacks and whites belonging to the same family structure, but she also condemns a social order that gives men all the power over women. To illustrate this dynamic, Chopin depicts Armand as an impetuous and arrogant young man who so ardently wants to possess Désirée that he offers her his name, “one of the oldest and proudest in Louisiana,” without a thought about her lack of origin. As her husband, in exchange for her obedience and devotion, he vows to protect and cherish her in the white male southern tradition that values their women as virtuous and delicate wives and mothers. However, once he thinks she is “not white,” even though she appears lighter than he is, his wife and mother of his son no longer has value to him. In fact, he considers that “[he] no longer loved her, because of the unconscious injury she had brought upon his home and his name” (“Désirée’s Baby” 244). Likewise, he believes this dissolves his responsibility for her and their son. Just like Thomas Sutpen calculatingly discards his supposedly mixed race wife and son, treating a woman as a commodity, Armand exercises his power as a white male. He ejects his now despised and useless possessions, Désirée and their baby from his life, for they cannot

any longer be a factor in his family story. His cold rejection drives her to commit suicide with their baby, while he definitively burns all traces of their belongings in a bonfire. White men with power dictate that race always prevails, according to Chopin, so that irrespective of marriage and children or love and duty, by law and social custom, miscegenation cannot be allowed in the family structure.

With the inclusion of a representative black woman as slave and likely concubine to a white master, Chopin introduces another layer of complexity to the slave-driven system of race in Louisiana. In “*Désirée’s Baby*,” one of Armand’s slaves, La Blanche, is likely his mistress. Since the goal of the Louisiana laws regarding interracial marriage was to remove threats to the institution of slavery from interracial offspring rather than to necessarily eliminate interracial sexual contact, racial concubinage was not outlawed (Brattain 626-627).⁴¹ By those laws, then, as well as his right of ownership of a black person, Armand can force sexual relations with La Blanche and father her children. Chopin uses veiled references and hints in the story to mirror the social phenomenon of miscegenation on plantations in which sexual relationships among white men and black women were open secrets. Since the overseer or any other white man in power could be a slave’s sexual abuser, Chopin only makes oblique reference to Armand as the perpetrator. Two clues support the notion that his slave is his mistress. First, *Désirée* comments that Armand heard the baby cry “as far away as La Blanche’s cabin” (“*Désirée’s Baby*” 241). Why would he be in the slave woman’s cabin? Then, it is through closely observing her son and one of La Blanche’s quadroon sons that *Désirée* sees a resemblance between them. This could mean she recognizes her son’s resemblance to a mixed-race child or that both boys have characteristics of Armand or both. Like “the magnate,” according to

Mary Chesnut in her Civil War diary, “who runs a hideous black harem and its consequences under the same roof [with his white family]” (168), Armand seems to have forced a slave to be his mistress and has fathered children with her. The text offers no indication that Armand acknowledges the quadroon offspring. Therefore, neither the legitimate son of his marriage to Désirée nor the illegitimate son of his sexual liaisons with La Blanche are recognized by him, which reinforces the notion of a strict legal and social code that prohibits a black-white family unit.

Chopin also uses La Blanche, whose name references her whiteness, to help illustrate the haziness in racial distinctions, for her skin is as white as Désirée’s hand. Critic Robert Arner suggests that Chopin shows “there is no absolute distinction between white and black, but rather an imaginary line drawn by white men” (140), who insist on racial identity to secure their superiority. Juxtaposed with the two female’s lightness is Armand, who is described as having a “dark, handsome face” and whose hand, as Désirée points out, is not as white as hers (“Désirée’s Baby” 243). He retorts that her hand is as white as La Blanche’s; thus, the established part-black La Blanche and the suspected mixed race Désirée are lighter than the supposedly white Armand. As has been discussed in previous chapters, both in fact and fiction, having crossed the imaginary color line at times of their choosing (Arner 140), white men have literally blurred the distinction between white and black, making the notion of white purity nearly impossible. This fact is brought home with finality at the end of the story when Armand learns his deceased mother was of black heritage, making him mixed race, and just as the two women, appearing very white.⁴² Not only has he been the one “passing” as white all along, but

with this revelation, Chopin underscores the point that racial purity is an impossible standard that needlessly destroys lives.⁴³

Although Chopin primarily addressed the terrible consequences of slavery, racism and miscegenation in “*Désirée’s Baby*,” she also created a microcosm of the plantation patriarchy, using many of the standard ingredients, to show the potential for misery in the system. Her picture includes a privileged white male master of a proud and noble family. He oversees the estate, L’Abri, with a strict hand and little compassion for the workers, his slaves unlike the mistress of Place-du-Bois in *At Fault*. To build his legacy, he acquires the beautiful, gentle and affectionate daughter from a neighboring plantation. She comes to him dependent and powerless; he is independent and controlling. He exercises his power over his property, dispensing charm and cruelty to his slaves as well as to her, confirming Mary Chesnut’s assertion that wives are like slaves. He beds the female slaves when he wants to and staffs his house with their offspring. When he uses his power to discard his legal wife and child, Désirée believes she has no future because of her black race, for she has “internalized the black-white hierarchy, assuming [it is] a sort of curse to be black” (Sollors 71-72). Equally important to her fate, she also understands that she has no place in a society in which a woman’s value in a white family comes from being a wife and mother, a role that has been denied her.

In this bleak story, Chopin exposes the devastating consequences on all people of slavery, racism and miscegenation in a culture that requires each individual to be ordered as white or black, good or bad, valuable or worthless, as a function of the racial hierarchy. In displaying Armand’s casual cruelty to Désirée and his slaves, Chopin condemns a system that grants men all the power, making women, like slaves, into

defenseless and ineffective pawns of society. As we will see in the next section, her approach to the racial hierarchy and women's roles within the patriarchy evolve in *At Fault*, which is a reflection of societal changes over the several decades since the antebellum period before the Civil War.

On the Threshold of Change: Compromise and Progress in *At Fault*

In “*Désirée’s Baby*,” Chopin revealed the senseless suffering inherent in the elite white patriarchy and slave system that both promoted miscegenation and rejected the mixed-race people it produced. As a reaction to the ongoing domination of the patriarchal system, in *At Fault*, she examined post-war society, juxtaposing the different worlds of the now slave-less southern agrarian plantation life of northwestern Louisiana and the modern life of the northern city of St. Louis, Missouri, both areas that Chopin had called home. The two settings in the novel can be assumed to contain some accurate depictions of plantation and St. Louis life in the early 1880s, if her contemporary reviewers of *At Fault* can be believed.⁴⁴ Newspaper critics praised Chopin’s novel for “excellent local color,” which created “pictures of place and persons that at once strike us as true to life,” and for its portrayal of “negro characteristics so faithfully” (*At Fault*, “Reviews” 168,169,163).⁴⁵ With her “true to life” portrayals, Chopin establishes the plantation as a conventional patriarchy with an important twist. Unlike the static and entrenched white male patriarchal system depicted in “*Désirée’s Baby*” and *The Awakening*, or in Faulkner’s *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, Chopin experiments first by placing a willing and capable woman, Thérèse Lafirme, as plantation master and then, at the novel’s close, by joining her skills with that of the industrial north. In contrast to her suggestion of progress in the rural South, Chopin criticizes the modern urban middle class patriarchy of St. Louis with its creation of frivolous women of leisure, as exemplified by Belle Worthington and Lou Dawson.

Within the patriarchy of the plantation society, Chopin also deals with issues of race and ethnicity in the highly diverse culture of Louisiana.⁴⁶ Many elements of the

mythical antebellum plantation world are portrayed with happy and loyal blacks toiling endlessly around the house and fields. The paternalistic elements are also intact with the caring white mistress who initially serves as a surrogate plantation manager for her deceased husband. She humors the black people and takes responsibility for their food and housing, even though they are now paid servants and field hands rather than her property. Along with this surface harmony, however, lurks a menacing racial tension. It is, after all, the post-Reconstruction South and the Jim Crow laws are already entrenched despite the equal rights given to blacks by the Constitutional Amendments and Civil Rights law.⁴⁷ In fact, the post-Civil War years in northwest Louisiana experienced an epidemic of crimes, including many against newly freed blacks. For all the suggestion of racial harmony on the plantation, then, this discussion of *At Fault* will reveal how Chopin shows that racism born of slavery and its attendant violence is very much alive in northwest Louisiana, although she stops short of contending that problems of race will hinder economic and social progress. Additionally, it will show how Chopin challenges the urban patriarchy in modern society and, in the alternative, proposes an unconventional structure that blends the agrarian and industrial worlds at the same time it capitalizes on the talents of both men and women.

* * *

As discussed in a previous chapter, much of the research surrounding elite white women who were thrust into the role of plantation manager during the Civil War suggests their skill and comfort lay in the domestic sphere rather than in growing crops and overseeing slaves. As we have seen, examples of their reluctant adaptations exist in journals, but much of the record shows their eagerness to return those responsibilities to

white males as quickly as possible. Although the adult Kate Chopin was never faced with that exact role in desperate war-time circumstances with restless slaves, given her own and her female relatives' competence and independence, she likely determined that the right kind of woman would be capable of handling traditional male responsibilities. By the time she wrote *At Fault* in 1889 and 1890, she had several years of experience in managing the business and legal affairs of her deceased spouse, Oscar, who had left their family finances in a mess. According to Chopin's biographer Emily Toth, at the time of his death in 1882, rather than relinquishing the complicated financial affairs to a male relation to resolve for her, she personally tackled the material debts and substantial unpaid property taxes, including taxes on parcels of land in New Orleans and northwestern Louisiana (93). Within fifteen months of Oscar's death, Chopin had erased all the debt and was supporting herself and her six young children in the little French village of Cloutierville in Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana (Toth 94).

Into this same rural setting, she placed young Thérèse Lafirme, who, like Chopin, unexpectedly assumes the business affairs of her deceased husband. Chopin, however, increased the challenge for her fictional female by having her inherit "unencumbered" and at her "disposal" a fully-operational, four-thousand acre plantation, the reigning symbol of the southern patriarchy and center of the social organization (*At Fault* 3). This was a significant departure from tradition, so that neighbors find Jerome Lafirme's directives in his will to be "unusual" since Thérèse is a "childless Creole" woman without male guidance and also without an heir to carry on the Lafirme family legacy (*At Fault* 3). They look for her to blunder, but after a while, "the anticipated folly failed to reveal itself; and the only wonder was that Thérèse Lafirme so successfully followed the

methods of her departed husband” (*At Fault* 3). In adhering to her husband’s methods, she is simply a caretaker of his success. Beyond that, however, Chopin positions her heroine as a competent business woman who is also able to adapt to change and to take advantage of opportunities to ensure the plantation will thrive in the future.

The plantation, with its center of power residing in one powerful individual is presented as a viable institution in *At Fault*, even fifteen years after the Civil War destroyed the slave system that supported the agrarian culture. In choosing Thérèse as the center of power, Chopin breaks with the male patriarch tradition. In her manner, decisions and actions, Thérèse, who in October 1890, *The St. Louis Post Dispatch* called “highly bred, cultivated, with a knowledge of the world and of affairs seldom possessed by woman” (*At Fault*, “Reviews” 162), assumes the characteristics of the white leader of an agricultural enterprise. First, she holds and exercises all the power on the plantation, which is immediately established in the novel when her loyal house servant, Uncle Hiram, interrupts her mourning to tell her that the field hands are stealing her cottonseed. Thérèse shakes off her grief and springs into action to protect her interests, for the thievery was “a tangible abuse and defiance of authority” (*At Fault* 4). According to David Russell, who writes about *At Fault*’s social structure, she also acts fast to “put in their [proper] place” the blacks who have challenged her authority by stealing from her plantation and abusing her trust in them (9). Chopin also endows Thérèse with a leadership style that has feminine qualities of gentleness, firmness and resolve; even so, her authority is unquestioned. Her manner of exercising her authority is firm, but gentle as the narrator observes: “There was hardly a soul at Place-du-Bois who had not felt the force of her will and yielded to its gentle influence” (*At Fault* 19). Her nephew, Grégoire

captures the dynamic of her power when he explains: “They ain’t no better woman in the world than Aunt Thérèse, w’en you do like she wants” (*At Fault* 15). In this Chopin, suggests that a woman’s leadership style may be different than a male’s approach, but it can be equally effective.

As with all persons of authority, at some point, following their directives is not always the correct course of action, as Thérèse proves with her misguided interference in David Hosmer’s marriage.⁴⁸ In matters of business, though, Chopin projects her female leader and head of the plantation as a clear-headed and rational woman. Like Chopin herself and unlike the typical dependent southern women of the time, Thérèse is not dominated by men or hopelessly mired in tradition. On the one hand, to escape the intrusiveness of the new railroad line, she relocates her home to another part of her property and builds an old-style home without modern innovations, choosing instead to “cling to the simplicity of large rooms and broad verandas . . . of easy-going and comfortable generations” (*At Fault* 4). Thérèse clings to the comfortable past in her personal living arrangements. When it comes to safeguarding the long-term viability of Place-du-Bois, however, even though she is not looking forward to the intrusion of the modern world, she sets aside tradition to allow on her land a sawmill and tree cutting operation “for a set number of years” and for an “alluring amount of money” (*At Fault* 6). This female leader knows how to strike a deal. She shows that she is “a clever enough businesswoman” who is both sufficiently pragmatic to recognize that industrialism is the new future and smart enough to decide to capitalize on it (*At Fault* 6).

At the end of the novel with Thérèse and Hosmer’s marriage, Chopin manipulates the residual plantation system to accommodate the new industrialism of the timber

business, represented by Hosmer, and the agrarianism of plantation production, represented by Thérèse. Chopin twice reinforces the business capabilities of her heroine to establish her competency, first by comparing her skills to a male's and then by having an experienced man acknowledge her proficiency. As she returns from a six-month journey to Paris, Thérèse learns that "things had not gone well at Place-du-Bois during her absence" because of a lack of supervision by the "the impecunious old kinsman whom she had left in charge" (*At Fault* 143). Then, her new husband, Hosmer, who is an accomplished businessman in his own right, refuses her offer to let him help her with the plantation. He recognizes that he "[should] put no bungling hand into [Thérèse's] concerns," since he knows nothing about the operation of a plantation, which is her acknowledged area of expertise. As importantly for their future, this northern man, whose expertise is in industrial work establishes that an unconventional patriarchy will remain in place at Place-du-Bois, for he tells Thérèse: "I'll not rob you of your occupation" (*At Fault* 147). With this assurance, Chopin determines her heroine will not be relegated to the typical domestic role by a limiting society and a controlling spouse, unlike other historical and fictional women of the period, such as Désirée Aubigny and Edna Pontellier. Instead, Chopin offers an even more progressive version of the patriarchy, a social order that is created with the marriage of the skills and occupation of the North and South, male and female.

By contrast to the progressive future hierarchy promised in rural northwestern Louisiana, through character portrayals, Chopin presents an evolving superficial and crass middle class that she criticizes for ineffectively capitalizing on its newfound prosperity. Likewise, in comparison to the potential for success of the blended social and

economic organization, in the modern industrial St. Louis, the conventional white male dominated patriarchy remains in place, according to Chopin. Men work and middle class women are ladies of leisure, as exemplified by the Worthingtons and Dawsons. Belle Worthington and Lou Dawson are described as “two ladies of elegant leisure, the condition of whose lives, and the amiability of whose husbands, had enabled them to develop into finished and professional time-killers (*At Fault* 47). Evidence exists that Chopin believed women should be productively occupied. In a February 6, 1898, article in *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, she was quoted as saying: “It is a good thing for women who have no other occupations to engage in [leadership] . . . It prevents women from becoming morbid, as they might, had they nothing to occupy their attention” (Toth and Seyersted 222). In *At Fault*, these “professional time-killers” are not involved in productive social and intellectual pursuits. Rather, Belle spends her time and money “finishing” herself by shopping and dressing extravagantly for her social outings. Lou has “finished” herself by perfecting the art of entertaining men friends while her traveling salesman husband is away on business. Mr. Dawson appreciates her skill as “up to the mark and game every time” (*At Fault* 49), although he probably does not anticipate sharing those talents with his wife’s male friends. Mr. Worthington sees women “as being of peculiar and unsuitable conformation to the various conditions of life” and only values their “usefulness as propagators of the species” (*At Fault* 48). He further regards women as “for the most part subservient to a weak and inadequate mentality” (*At Fault* 48). Unlike her admiration for the capable, resourceful and gentle southern woman and her appreciative, respectful partner who combine their skills for a productive future, Chopin blasts the representatives of the urban patriarchy. She expressed her disdain for

such women as a violation of the opportunity to engage themselves in the world. In a May 1894 entry in “Impressions,” the only surviving journal from her adult years, Chopin wrote: “How immensely uninteresting some ‘society’ people are! That class which we know as Philistines. Their refined voices, and refined speech which says nothing – or worse, says something which offends me!” (Toh and Seyersted 179-180). She labels the wives in *At Fault* as loud, crude and shallow, time-killers whose men view their gender as ill-equipped for anything but sexual enjoyment and child-bearing. The perceived female “subservience,” “weakness,” and “inadequacy” are echoes of her position on the antebellum southern patriarchy, which Chopin challenges as ineffectual for the evolving society in which men and women each participate in an enlightened way.

* * *

Unlike the promise of future progress from the merger of the agrarian and industrial elements within the patriarchy, the racial condition of northwestern Louisiana is stuck with one foot in the harmonious antebellum-like world and the other in the turmoil of post-emancipation, Jim Crow South. In presenting the exaggerated picture of contentment and loyalty among the blacks on the plantation, Chopin suggests that much about the pre-Civil War paternalistic system remains the same. It is feasible that plantation life in Natchitoches Parish had certain similarities to its pre-war society, since that corner of Louisiana was untouched by the destructiveness of battle or the Union Army occupation (*At Fault*, “Introduction” xxiii-xxiv). To this point, a reviewer from the *St. Louis Spectator*, who said *At Fault* would appeal to “lovers of sprightly and refined literature,” also wrote that Chopin “gracefully told” her story set in fictional Place-du-Bois: “There is little change in the state of society since the war. The negroes cultivate

the soil, looking as of yore to the whites for guidance and protection” (*At Fault*, “Reviews” 160). Although the reviewer failed to comment on it, all is not as it seems, for beneath the placid surface, Chopin points to an undercurrent of rage caused by the enduring culture of racism that existed in actuality in the 1880s Louisiana.

The paternalistic culture of Place-du-Bois, in many ways, mirrors that of the antebellum plantation wherein the master took care of, but also controlled all work and people, including his slaves. Like the patriarch of the antebellum South or fictional Thomas Sutpen of Sutpen’s Hundred, in *At Fault*, queenly Thérèse surveys her kingdom with the power to command and indulge her subjects, the black people. In fact, her northern visitor, Melicent Hosmer, likens her to royalty: “When she stands at the end of the veranda, giving orders to those darkies . . . she’s positively a queen” (*At Fault* 25). Just like the antebellum plantation myths maintain, Chopin paints an idyllic picture of a pastoral world that is very different from the hustle and bustle of modern St. Louis. At Place-de-Bois, the house servants seem dear and harmless as they go about their duties. A visitor observes that the house is “swarming with idle women and children” (*At Fault* 16). For example, Uncle Hiram slowly labors to create the “perfect lawn;” Betsy, described as “a piece of youthful ebony,” leisurely attends to her chicken feeding chores; and little Sampson lazily builds a fire in the hearth (*At Fault* 5). In the fields, “the scores of negroes, men, women and children picking cotton” are nameless and faceless people toiling for the mistress (*At Fault* 36). Her power also allows her to indulge her former slaves as part of the long-time plantation family. She caters to old Morico, “whose long life spent on the place had established her tolerance” for his errant son (*At Fault* 19). In the same way, she houses her childhood mammy in her own cabin by the river.

For all the tolerance and care given to them, the mistress of Place-du-Bois and other white people project an attitude of ownership of the blacks, even though they have been hired workers “at very good pay” rather than slaves for years (*At Fault* 17). Critic Donna Campbell argues this view is a legacy of labor in which the master “takes[s] for granted the right to control the body of another” (39). Two examples illustrate this ongoing assumption of white ownership of the black body. First, the black domestic servants believe the northern visitor plans to cut off the pigtales of Mandy. Explains Nathan: “Dey’low you wants to cut de little gals’plaits off” (*At Fault* 17). The important point is their belief that any white person can abuse the black person’s body, just as if she were still a slave. A second example of the continuation of bodily ownership involves Thérèse wanting to comfort her agitated mind by visiting her old, former slave Morico to “comb out that exquisite white hair of his” (*At Fault* 75). Her presumption is that of an owner who possesses the right to intrude on another person’s physical body, with or without his consent and at a time of her choosing.

More troubling than the residual ownership attitude is the pervasive racism that disrupts the picture of black contentment. Chopin reveals several truths about racism in northwest Louisiana. Interestingly, except for the hint of menace around the tales of long-dead, Old McFarlane, depicted as a Simon Legree-like character, Chopin stays away from the subject of the sexual power of white masters over black slave women. Additionally, Chopin does not mention the supposed sexual desire of black men for white women, which gave rise to the violence against black males during this period in history. Instead, in *At Fault* she chose to confront other elements of racism. First, she showed that racism is complicated by a diverse hierarchy in Louisiana that belies efforts to force a

person into a black or white identity. Second, for all of the diversity of the region, she further recognized that people of mixed-race unions are often outcasts, like Joe Christmas in *Light in August*. Third, she portrayed violence as a central part of white people asserting supremacy over blacks, with the black person more often than not getting hurt or killed.

The requirement for a single racial identity was often stymied by a heritage of racial, ethnic and cultural diversity in Louisiana. In her discussion of race and ethnicity in *At Fault*, Susan Castillo remarks that it is sometimes “impossible to determine exactly where one ‘race’ ends and another begins” (59). Yet, a distinct hierarchy is in place which dictates an individual’s life of privilege or degradation. Thus, whites, including the white Creoles of French and Spanish ancestry, such as Thérèse Lafirme and Kate Chopin reign supreme and hold the majority of power. Even though by law the “one drop” rule existed in Louisiana until the 1960s, culturally, the “whitened” Creole, with only a trace of black blood “achieved recognition as a distinct ethnic group” with a caste system of its own (*At Fault*, “Creoles of Color” 238). According to Gary Mills’ study of *gens de couleur libre*, “Creoles of color” graduated from the privileged octoroons, who were seven-eighths white to the full-blooded black Creoles, who were at the bottom of the scale (*At Fault*, “Creoles of Color” 238). In the classification system, the African Americans, however, were even more degraded than the black Creoles.

Not only does racial bias exist between the purely-white and any person of color in Louisiana, but it is rampant within the black culture. At one extreme, Grégoire claims to be purely-white Creole; however, his hands are described as “not so refinedly white . . . yet, they were not coarsened” (*At Fault* 12). Too, his French mother has retired to

France, just like Armand Aubigny's mother-of-color absented herself to save him from southern racial prejudice in "Désirée's Baby." Nevertheless, Grégoire is clearly racist, shunning any perceived "nigger" duties and refusing to drink with blacks. Thérèse's childhood mammy from New Orleans, her grosse tante, Marie Louise, confirms the discrimination among the Creoles of color and African Americans. She is described as "a negress --- coal black and enormously fat" (*At Fault* 77). Yet, she speaks in Creole dialect and disdains "ces neges Americains" as she calls the plantation hands who she considers spoiled, "lazy niggers" (*At Fault* 79). Through those characters, Chopin shows the inherent bias within the non-white hierarchy.

With her inclusion of Joçint, one-half Indian and one-half non-Creole black, Chopin provides an insight into the mixed race person as outcast. For one thing, Joçint rebels against the contemporary social order that continues to subjugate him and all blacks years after emancipation. Thérèse and Hosmer describe him as "extremely treacherous," "unbearable," "always unruly," and in "open revolt" (*At Fault* 22, 9, 10). He causes trouble at his mill job by intentionally "let[ting] the logs roll off the carriage," and is generally "inclined to surreptitious defiance of white authority" (*At Fault* 22, 19). His rebelliousness is also directed at the disruption caused by the saw mill, for he is an outcast who cannot adjust to progress. He knows only violence as a way to "revolt" against the whites who have brought about the destruction of his pristine woods and have forced him, as a mill employee, to participate in the ruin (Russell 12-13). He finally has to die because he cannot adjust to the irreversible tide of progress or to his proper place in the social hierarchy. Through Joçint, Chopin warns that in order for a semblance of the

former way of life to survive, changes are essential. Progress, like the railroad that weaves through northwestern Louisiana, will not be stopped.

The violence that is displayed by Joçint is repeated in his racially-charged death. Chopin uses it to show “the fiction of racial harmony in Louisiana and [to] reveal its submerged violence” (Campbell 40). When unarmed Joçint is killed by Grégoire for burning down the mill, he believes he should “receive praise for having rid the community of so offensive and dangerous a personage as Joçint” (*At Fault* 96). The white and black communities agree with him for different reasons. The blacks are “of one opinion” that he got “wát he done ben lookin’ fu’ dis long time” (*At Fault* 96). In other words, the troublesome black outcast has been removed and harmony is restored. For the whites, Grégoire is not prosecuted for murder because in this racist society, a black man’s life is “a fair exchange for the destruction of property” (Campbell 40).⁴⁹

For a white man, such as Grégoire, to go unpunished was not unusual in real life Louisiana. At that time, including in near-by Caddo Parish with its highest incidence of racial violence, blacks were far more likely to be punished for crimes than whites, and even small offenses yielded big punishment for blacks. A study by Gilles Vandal of crime in rural Louisiana in the post-war years 1866-1876 revealed that whites were more likely than blacks to commit property crimes, but if blacks were caught, they were likely to be killed by an individual or vigilance committee (*At Fault*, “Crimes” 203, 206). Likewise, in an 1868 Freedman’s Bureau report of Louisiana “outrages” against black freedmen, of the seventy blacks killed by whites and the 210 freedmen who were shot at, whipped, stabbed and beaten, it was stated that “no white man [has] been punished for killing or ill-treating a freedmen” (“Freedmen’s Bureau Report”).

Having lived in this region, which was also the site of her fictional Place-du-Bois, Chopin was well aware of this ever-present undercurrent of racism and violence. Although she revealed the racism in her fiction, she did not suggest that ongoing racial unrest would undermine the economic and domestic progress of the region. Nor were the racist elements acknowledged by her reviewers who saw her novel as “domestic drama” and a “clever romance of Louisiana life,” where negroes look to whites for “guidance and protection” (*At Fault*, “Reviews” 161, 166, 160). If *At Fault* is a domestic drama, it is one that is constructed to propose a new way of structuring southern society so that the industrial and the agrarian, men and women can be contributing participants to progress, unlike the white male patriarchy of the antebellum and post-war South.⁵⁰

Presumption and Privilege:

Personal Freedom vs. An 'Inessential Adjunct to a Man' in *The Awakening*

The first speaker in *At Fault* is black servant Uncle Hiram, who sets his mistress on her proper course as plantation owner with his warning: "Things is a goin' wrong, dat dey is" (*At Fault* 3). Throughout *At Fault*, the blacks and mixed race people are named, described and engaged in action and conversation. They help capture the local color and also establish the role of blacks in patriarchal plantation life in northwestern Louisiana. In contrast to their large presence in *At Fault*, people of mixed race largely seem to hover in the background without distinct identity in *The Awakening*. Yet, their part in every day society was as important to New Orleans culture as it was to rural Louisiana. Even though it is more subtly positioned, race's role in Edna Pontellier's awakening is as central to her as it was to Thérèse Lafirme's success as the owner and mistress of her plantation.

Similarly, the white patriarchy remained the key organizing principal of post-Reconstruction southern society, although its use in the two novels is quite different. As we saw in *At Fault*, Chopin exerted a woman's capabilities by having a white female successfully play the role of plantation master and by creating a new vision for the social order for the future that embraced both male and female leadership contributions. Contrasted with that progressive view, in the world of *The Awakening*, the protagonist functions in an arrangement in which she is treated as a commodity in an atmosphere of stifling convention, a throwback to the antebellum south of *Absalom, Absalom!* and "Désirée's Baby." Yet, Edna seeks to exercise her "right to be herself" and to exert personal freedom, irrespective of society's expectations of a woman. Chopin shows,

however, that when a woman's attempts for freedom collide with the principles of family and patriarchy at the core of southern tradition, her efforts cannot succeed.⁵¹ This discussion of *The Awakening* will show how the traditional white patriarchal system and the cultural constructions of race simultaneously enable and thwart Edna's journey to find herself.⁵²

* * *

1890s New Orleans fully embraced the hierarchy that placed elite white males atop the social and economic pyramid. Women, and specifically, elite wives of the period were viewed as another of man's possessions, or as a commodity, much like Ellen Sutpen and Eulalia Bon in *Absalom, Absalom!* Chopin establishes this view with Edna's husband, Léonce Pontellier, a successful French Creole who owns his own brokerage firm. His is a fitting position of power for one who buys and sells with the goal of amassing wealth, position and possessions. His house on exclusive Esplanade Street is resplendent with paintings, rich carpets and fine furnishings, all of which are symbols of his social and business achievements. He admires his possessions "chiefly because they were his" (*Awakening* 48), and his prized property is Edna. The narrator advises, for example, that he scrutinizes his sunburned wife "as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (*Awakening* 4). In Mr. Pontellier's brokerage and marriage business, property must be maintained in perfect condition or it loses its value.

The masters of the patriarchy were also firmly in control, and Mr. Pontellier considers it his right as a husband and a white man. He is a man who prides himself on his business savvy and schemes, taking long trips away from home to New York "to be

on the field proper to pull the ropes and handle the ribbons” (*Awakening* 64), in other words, to handle the reins and to be in direct charge of his business. In southern elite society, typically the woman had responsibility for managing the domestic affairs of home and children. Mr. Pontellier, however, also enjoys oversight of these aspects of his domain, which includes directing his wife. He likes to “handle the ribbons” on the “field proper” of the home front. Consequently, he reproaches Edna for her habitual neglect of him and the children as well as her disregard for his orders. Her father, a Civil War Colonel, understands the rule of men and gives advice to his troubled son-in-law: “Authority, coercion are what is needed [with Edna]. Put your foot down good and hard; the only way to manage a wife” (*Awakening* 68). In his own elite white world of Kentucky, the Colonel’s coercions likely put Edna’s mother in an early grave. Mr. Pontellier’s stifling requirements, which are representative of men’s possession and control of wives in the patriarchy, will help drive his own wife to her death.

Women were also slaves to the conventions of the patriarchal society. As we saw in 19th history and in Faulkner’s fiction, in the southern tradition, woman was placed on a pedestal as the man’s object of devotion, and for this reverence she was required to be virtuous, dependent and obedient. The benefits of the system in which she was the devoted wife and mother were protection, her lovely possessions, servants to care for her house and family, leisure time and some freedom. Three decades earlier, Mary Chesnut wryly observed that “a husband is the fountain from whence all blessings flow” (169). She also admitted the penalty for those benefits was steep, for, she opined: “There is no slave after all, life a wife” (Chesnut 59). The wife was both the pampered possession and the slave. In “*Désirée’s Baby*,” Chopin reveals how fragile this arrangement can be if the

husband no longer wants the wife, for he can cast her off as easily as he can sell an unwanted slave. In a different scenario of the broken pact, as earlier discussed, Civil War wives found their expectations for protection were shattered by their absent soldier husbands' inability to care for them. In *The Awakening*, Mr. Pontellier believed he had committed to a conventional marriage. As such, Edna was required to view her husband as the object of her existence, just as Mr. Pontellier thought that Edna "was the sole object of his" (*Awakening* 7). As his beautiful and treasured possession, it is no wonder that Mr. Pontellier is frustrated by Edna having "so little interest in things which concerned him" (*Awakening* 7), and "her absolute disregard for her duties as a wife angered him" (*Awakening* 55). After all, in his reckoning and male businessman's frame of reference, she has not fulfilled her part of their brokered deal.

Observing the rituals of domestic life were required of the elite white wife, and Edna's neglect of them is a reflection of her growing rejection of woman's prescribed role. While Chopin created a character in Thérèse Lafirme who became successful because she adjusted to a changing world, Edna's dissatisfaction stems from being force-fit into a way of life that no longer suits her. She wants to change, but the social order in which she lives is static. She realizes the domestic life is "not a condition of life which fitted her" (*Awakening* 54). According to an advice book of the late 1800s, a wife was "never [to let] your husband have cause to complain," (*Awakening*, "Advice" 122), a rule that Edna repeatedly breaks. Further, the admonition that home should be "consider[ed] as the center of your being" feels like a prison sentence to her (*Awakening*, "Advice" 122). She ignores the Tuesday reception of important visitors to her home, a ritual that is a reflection of the family's social standing and to which advice books command: "Let

nothing, but the most important duty, call you out upon your reception day” (*Awakening*, “Advice” 123). She pays little attention to the quality of meals and only halfheartedly chastises the cook, for which Mr. Pontellier berates her. Edna has begun to rebel against society’s confining rules for women and marriage (Seyersted 204).

Some women, such as the spinster pianist Mademoiselle Reisz and advocate-of-blacks, Joanna Burden, found unique ways to endure the stultifying confines of patriarchal society. Others, however, embraced the role of motherhood that with marriage, defined their opportunities as elite white women. Critic Diane Roberts, in her discussion of perfection in southern motherhood, suggests that *The Awakening* “poses a . . . debate between the madonna, who would annihilate herself for her children, and a woman who begins to see that she has a discrete self” (Roberts 191). French Creole Adèle Ratignolle embodies the “mother woman,” who Edna asserts she is not and can never be (*Awakening* 9). Adèle represents the women who “idealized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (*Awakening* 9). In fact, she epitomizes the ideal of 1890s southern womanhood. Edna, however, perceives Adèle’s lot of endless pregnancy, child rearing and catering to her husband as one of bondage rather than the freedom she desires, according to critic Carl Wade (97). Regardless of Edna’s view, though, Madame Ratignolle is blissful with her circumstance as a “faultless Madonna” should be. The 1897 women’s advice book may state, “What the child needs . . . is the presence and influence of mother” (*Awakening*, “Advice” 123), but Edna puts herself before her children, and, in fact, she relinquishes their care to the octoroon.

* * *

Like the white patriarchy it supports, the racial hierarchy was well-established in 1890s New Orleans. People of color in the Louisiana classification system ranged from full “negro” to the “octoroon,” moving closer to white in skin shade but remaining black by law.⁵³ In the racial language of *The Awakening*, people of color are referred to as octoroon, griffe, and mulatto or by their skin color, such as light-skinned or black. Rarely are they given names or an obvious and prominent role; rather, they seem to linger in the background until they are called upon to serve the wealthy Pontelliers and other families who live in their social sphere. On closer examination, however, it is clear that Chopin gives the collective black and mixed race people a distinct role to play in Edna’s spiritual journey. Their services provide her with the opportunity for exploration; at the same time, though, her conventional race-bound attitudes help thwart the very “awakening” that she seeks.

As Edna begins to defy her conventional role as wife and mother, it is the household of servants that enables her to proceed with her search. In this well-to-do household, “labor and the presence of black people are systematically assumed,” according to critic Barbara Ewell (34). Her household responsibilities are completely handled by servants. In her study of elite white women of the antebellum South, historian Faust established that “a lady’s elite status had been founded in the oppressions of slavery” (Faust, *Mothers* 7). Decades later, that foundation remains strong, and the availability of servants is no less an expectation of the elite white woman than if the blacks and mixed race servants were still slaves. Critic Michele Birnbaum suggests that to some extent Edna’s “awakening is a white middle-class luxury,” since she had

plentiful servants to liberate her from her domestic responsibility (304). A cook prepares food for the family, housemaids clean, servants wait on callers with delicacies and “a light-colored mulatto boy, in dress coat and bearing a diminutive silver tray . . . admit[s] [Tuesday callers]” (*Awakening* 48). When it comes to the duties of motherhood, therefore, she has few maternal responsibilities since the quadroon is full-time nursemaid to the children. The nameless quadroon looks after them at the beach, watches them at home, and goes with them to Iberville to visit their grandmother for an indefinite time. In fact, the quadroon’s total care of the children, including absenting them from their mother, gives to Edna the freedom to begin her affair with Alcée Arobin and to travel across the bay from Grand Isle with Robert Lebrun (Birnbaum 305). The quadroon is also a kind of playmate to the boys who “[were] dragging along . . . a small express wagon . . . filled with blocks and sticks” with her “following them with little quick steps” (*Awakening* 51). In typical fashion for the inattentive mother, Edna is with them but unattached to their presence and with “no interest in anything about her” (*Awakening* 7). It is no wonder the answer to Mr. Pontellier’s question – “If it was not a mother’s place to look after the children, whose on earth was it?” – would be the quadroon (*Awakening* 7). The work of the quadroon and all the other servants, which Edna complains as being “too many,” gives her the unencumbered time to pursue her interests (*Awakening* 76).

The racial bias she displays toward her black and mixed race servants as well as others with whom she interacts, however, keeps her from escaping this conventional life for something new. In her study of race in *The Awakening*, Anna Shannon Elfenbein argues that Edna’s participation in the “white upper-class . . . racist, classist and patriarchal society,” creates in her a “presumption of privilege,” and it traps her (179-

180). As we have seen in the antebellum and post-bellum periods, southern womanhood was dependent on race for her status and life of leisure, either through slavery or paid servants. To this point, Edna takes for granted the physical labor of the nameless blacks. Rather than appreciating the efforts of the quadroon as the surrogate who frees her from motherhood, she looks upon her “as a huge encumbrance, only good to button up waists and panties and to brush and part hair” (*Awakening* 9). Biographer Toth suggests that the quadroon nursemaid never has a voice and never reacts to Edna’s scolding. She believes this represented “Chopin’s clearest admission that white people could not know what a black woman might be thinking,” for “too much suffering and oppression had separated them” (12). This may be true, but there is no indication that Edna ever attempts to recognize blacks as other than servants to her needs. Critic Birnbaum further suggests the quadroon, at times, is “rendered narratively invisible” and is only part of the inventory of “other items of local color” rather than a human being (305). Edna’s lack of consideration for her laborers is also displayed when she throws a tantrum and tosses her wedding ring and a vase, which requires a maid to clean up her mess. The maid returns her ring to her as a symbolic attempt to reestablish her role as a wife and mother (Birnbaum 307), but the shattered vase represents a life that cannot be put back together. In another incident of disregard, she orders Mariequita, a woman of color, to get fish for a supper she knows she will not eat. Very telling about her unshakeable perspective of race and class privilege is her plan to escape her unhappy life on Esplanade Street for the pigeon house, which she has bought with her father’s money. After complaining about her multiple servants, she concludes: “Old Celestine . . . will come and stay with me and do my work” (*Awakening* 76). Edna’s conventional views on race, including her obvious presumptive

attitude about the black and mixed race people who labor for her, help keep her from escaping her conventional life for the freedom she desires.

While Edna's traditional attitudes about race hinder her progress, the prevailing culture of the white patriarchy represents the overpowering obstacle to the personal freedom that she seeks. Her interests, desires and methods operate in direct conflict with male expectations as well as the conventional southern female's requirements around domestic and family life. Unlike a woman, such as Thérèse Lafirme who succeeds because she can adjust within the system, Edna is simply swallowed up for her rebellion and failure to fit, for as Chopin argues, the force of culture will overwhelm its challengers.

As a white woman who lived in urban and rural Louisiana, as well as the modern city of St. Louis, Chopin understood the dynamics that faced women in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Too, as a woman who grew up with black slaves and later servants, both in the city and on her husband's remote plantation, she was in a position to observe and experience the complexities of the racial hierarchy. Her life spanned major cultural transformations, such as those brought by emancipation of the slaves and Reconstruction, but the central societal organizing principle of the white patriarchy remained in place, just as it does in her fiction. As Faulkner showed us in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Light in August*, failure to fit in its design, faulty though it was, meant failure for people, such as his character Joe Christmas. Chopin illustrated the same dynamic in the three works of this paper. Désirée has no place in the design for her hint of black blood. Her recourse is death, for she is denied the only role available to her, that of wife and mother. In her desire for personal freedom, Edna rejects the stifling

patriarchy of her Creole traditions, and she is doomed for making choices which put her at odds with her culture. Finally, although the plantation society of *At Fault* is an anachronism in post-Reconstruction Louisiana, Chopin redeems it by imagining its merger with the modern innovations of railroads and mills. Unlike the unyielding white patriarchies of Faulkner and her other fiction in this essay, Chopin shows that success is possible in a progressive society which values the talents of women as well as men.

Conclusion

This essay has looked at the enduring impact of the white patriarchy that dominated the South from the antebellum period through the time Faulkner published *Absalom, Absalom!* in 1936. In the literature of Faulkner and Chopin, we have seen illustrations of the struggles of humanity to find a place in an unforgiving southern society of inflexible beliefs about race and gender. Our women diarists have lent their voices to embellish and validate in a highly personal way their experiences and challenges in the culture, especially during the Civil War. We discovered that the reality of post-bellum South was not the “moonlight and magnolias” found in fiction, such as Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind*, which represented the prevailing historical view of Reconstruction South until the 1930s. Critic Ben Railton summarizes that view: “race relations were fine until the Yankees came down, freed the slaves, and then offered them equality of all kinds (particularly sexual) with whites; from that point onward the free blacks became increasingly unruly and dangerous, especially to white women until the white men had no choice but to form the Ku Klux Klan to protect their women and restore the natural order of things” (55).⁵⁴ In the 1930s, that view was challenged for the fictions it contained, and an alternative or revisionist historical interpretation was suggested, to which Eric Sundquist argues Faulkner subscribed, especially as expressed in *Absalom, Absalom!* (Railton 57).

Faulkner’s energetic wrestling with race relations and miscegenation in his fiction, and Chopin’s various depictions of race, which stem from the rich Creole and non-Creole cultures of her stories, demand a deeper look than what I have explored in this essay. I have argued that as authors with “historical consciousness,” it is important to

understand their region's unique history in order to enrich the interpretation of their works. For that reason, an investigation into the myths and fictions that drove historical events in the South, shaping lives and the politics of the region, would be useful. One such myth that warrants scrutiny is the black man as sexual beast, which had profound and lasting implications for the mistreatment of blacks, and, in some ways, the oppression of white women because their perceived need for protection kept them in a subjugated position. As we earlier saw, some women diarists remained confident in their black slaves while others expressed fears of being raped by black men, as the Civil War progressed to its conclusion. To illustrate this fear in fiction, we can look to *Absalom, Absalom!* Implied in the 1865 scene between Charles Bon and Henry Sutpen is that Bon is the "nigger" who will rape Judith, the white sister, a projected horror that requires him to kill Bon. Yet, the true hysteria over the sexual black males actually began sometime after black emancipation rather than in the antebellum period. According to historian Eugene Genovese, the "titillating and violence-provoking theory of the superpotency of that black superpenis, while whispered about for several centuries, did not become the obsession in the South until after emancipation" (qtd. in Sommerville 485).

One current approach by scholars to understanding the validity and genesis of the "rape myth" is to look to the courts for clues. In a study of court cases from 1800 – 1865, in which claims were made of sexual assault on white women by black men, historian Diane Sommerville concludes that race was not the only factor in court findings and punishment. In Virginia, for example, nearly half of the black men who were condemned to die for sexually assaulting white women escaped execution, which was the proscribed punishment for that crime (Sommerville 485).⁵⁵ In numerous cases, if a white woman's

conduct was outside the established norm, the courts were less likely to rule in her favor, particularly if she was poor rather than from the planter class. Additionally, in some cases, for economic reasons related to the value of an accused slave, a planter would protect his property, “ally[ing] with African American men against the white female accusers” (Sommerville 516), thus denying a singular allegiance to race.⁵⁶

The sample of court records reveals an absence of hysteria about the black male as uncontrollable, sexual predator of white females during the antebellum period. Only after emancipation, when black men gained some power and independence did his supposedly insatiable appetite for white women take hold of the southerners’ imaginations. The historical records previously cited of the Freedman’s Bureau and Ida Wells-Barnett’s investigation into lynching in Georgia in 1899 testify to the post-Civil War and Reconstruction-era furor. Neil McMillen’s research of unpunished lynching in Mississippi in his book, *Dark Journey*, also bears out the notion that “the presumption of both white public and white law [is] that intercourse between white women and black men could result only from rape” (qtd. in Andrews, “Shaping” 4). By the time Faulkner published *Light in August* in 1932, the mere accusation of rape of any white woman by a black man was intolerable. Whether it was outcast Yankee Joanna Burden in fiction or a lewd woman from the Mississippi streets, she was “by God . . . a white woman,” as one spectator cried out during the 1933 trial of the Scottsboro Boys (Sommerville 518), and she would be protected by law or mob justice from the bestial black male. By that time, all southern white women, “fallen” or elite, were elevated to the pedestal of sacred lady hood, which grew out of the antebellum myth of her virtuousness. The judge’s instruction to the jury in the Scottsboro Boys case is illustrative of the evolution from myth to belief

system to being fully alive in the law. This example applies specifically to the sexual black male and the virtuous southern white woman on whom he supposedly preys. The judge told the jurors: “Where the woman charged to have been raped, as in this case is a white woman there is a very strong presumption under the law that she would not and did not yield voluntarily to intercourse with the defendant, a Negro, and this is true, whatever the station in life the prosecutrix may occupy, whether she be the most despised, ignorant and abandoned woman of the community, or the spotless virgin and daughter of a prominent home of luxury” (qtd. in Sommerville 518).

White hysteria over predatory black males was also wrapped up in one of the most complicated aspects of race relations, miscegenation. As we have seen in this essay, confirmations of interracial sexual relationships are everywhere in the fiction of Faulkner and Chopin. They are evident in the form of nameless octoroons, a presumably white baby with black features, a man of undetermined “racial” origins, a mulatto sister to a white woman, to name a few. Their pervasiveness does not mean mixed race people are desirable in the society. To the contrary, the southern culture was historically intolerant of racial mixing, a notion that seems clear simply by the number of anti-miscegenation laws on the books of southern states well into the twentieth century, as well as the surfeit of court cases in which they were argued. That same intolerance is exposed in the fictions addressed in this paper, in which mixed race people are evicted from or deprived of families, ignored, commit suicide or are murdered.

More so in Faulkner’s life time than in Chopin’s, the body of anti-miscegenation law reveals “society in the act of inventing race” and racial identity (Fields 107). Romeo and Juliet’s interest in each other could not be prevented by anti-miscegenation law, as

Faulkner observed. It could only serve as a tool to monitor the racial boundaries that were first erected to protect the economics of the institution of slavery. Later, with the end of slavery, the law served to allay southerners' fears of "social equality [among races] and unrestricted sex across the race line" (Brittain 630). Well into the twentieth century, racial mixing was, at times, touted by science as biologically unsound with the potential for creating a "mongrel breed of citizens" (Sollors 19). Perhaps this is the idea Faulkner promoted in the howling black idiot Jim Bond, the last of the Sutpen dynasty.

My point is this: by understanding the evolution in history of beliefs about miscegenation as a factor in southern race relations, and certainly, the investigation of legal history is one avenue for exploration, we can better comprehend Faulkner's and Chopin's placement and treatment of those themes in their works. By deconstructing the myths and fictions, we are more likely to appreciate how historical events about which they wrote were shaped. Or, in the example of the myth of the black male as sexual beast, we can see the social construct of race as it is being defined, an exercise that is ongoing. Writing in 1990 about race ideology, Barbara Fields said: "If race lives on today, it does not live on because we have inherited from our forebears . . . but because we continue to create it today" (117). As I record her words, I think about a young black male in a hoodie who is surely a thug, and I know our society is still in the act of defining race and creating destructive myths around it, just as the worlds of Faulkner and Chopin were doing. And, so, I think about the truth of Faulkner's words from *Requiem for a Nun*: "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

Notes

¹ Poet Allen Tate described southern writers as possessing an historical consciousness, that is, a “consciousness of the past in the present” that penetrates their works (qtd. in Woodward 35).

² Kate Chopin published *At Fault* in 1890, “Désirée’s Baby” in 1893 and *The Awakening* in 1899. William Faulkner published *Light in August* in 1932 and *Absalom, Absalom!* in 1936.

³ Michelle Brattain explains that “the white mythology of black hypersexuality subjected black women to much abuse that white men described as sensual” (641).

⁴ Mary Chesnut’s usage of the Italian terms “cordifiamma” and “corpifiamma” roughly translates into expressions of physical passion and sensuality (243).

⁵ Quentin Compson committed suicide in *The Sound and the Fury*, but the likely reason for it is revealed in *Absalom, Absalom!*

⁶ In the late nineteenth century, Charles Bon and Désirée Aubigny were destroyed because the biases of their families could not accept their racial impurity. Decades later in the racial hysteria of 1930s Mississippi, Joe Christmas never knew his racial identity, but he was brutally castrated and killed for being the black man who violated a virtuous white woman. Joanna Burden tried to bridge the racial divide with her alleged black lover, Joe Christmas, and she openly tried to have a child with him. A white woman desiring a black man was taboo. Additionally, a mixed-race baby could not be, and she was punished for her offense against society.

⁷ Critic Susan Castillo in her discussion of race in Chopin's fiction identifies the term "race" as a social construct, or a "metaphor that serves to inscribe, naturalize and, occasionally, subvert power relationships" (60).

⁸ The racial classifications kept blacks socially contained, and they were also spatially or territorially contained. Abraham Lincoln's post-emancipation colonization plan would have relocated all blacks to countries outside the United States. In the period of the "great migration" of blacks from the South to northern and western cities from 1915 – 1970, Chicago, for example, did not limit the number of blacks who could enter the city, according to Isabel Wilkerson in *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. Rather, black housing was contained in the "black belt," a few blocks surrounded by impenetrable white neighborhoods, which represented racial walls that had been "successfully defended for generations" (Wilkerson 372). By 1950, approximately 500,000 blacks were crammed into the black belt (Wilkerson 372), and it was nearly impossible for new arrivals to find housing in the sole area available to them.

⁹ *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from an Unfinished War* by Tony Horowitz offers an insightful look at the dedication and mindset of modern day southern Civil War reenactors.

¹⁰ In his article "Down Memory Lane: Nostalgia for the Old South in Post-Civil War Plantation Reminiscences," David Anderson characterizes Mary Chesnut's end-of-war entries as being a story of "grief, anguish, pessimism, and anxiety" (112).

¹¹ Not all slaves fled or turned on their owners as the war progressed. The diary of Emma Florence LeConte, which was published as *The Day the World Ended: The Diary of Emma LeConte, 1864-1865*, traces her experiences in Columbia, South Carolina during

the final months of the Civil War, including Sherman's burning of the city. Her diary repeatedly praises her black servants as "very kind and faithful" in their care of the white family (LeConte 27). The "negroes" forage for food and bring them news of the Federal Army activities. Tellingly, she writes: "How times change! Those whom we have so long fed and cared for now help us" (LeConte 28).

¹² General Order 28 was issued in occupied New Orleans in response to elite white women spitting, gesturing at soldiers, ignoring them and waving Confederate flags. General Order 28 said: "When any female shall, by word, gesture, or movement, insult or show contempt for any officer or soldier of the United States, she shall be regarded and held liable to be treated as a woman of the town plying her vocation" (qtd. in Rable 141).

¹³ It was in this publication that the term "miscegenation" was coined. It is from the Latin *miscere*, "to mix," and *genus*, "race."

¹⁴ In Appendix B, "Prohibitions of Interracial Marriage and Cohabitation," *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature*, by Werner Sollors is a listing of state and selected international laws and court cases.

¹⁵ Historian Eric Sundquist argued in "*Absalom, Absalom!* House Divided" that "the children of miscegenation . . . threatened to blur the distinction that made slavery possible" (126).

¹⁶ In his 1722 study on race, *Nouveau Voyage Aux Isles de l'Amérique*, Dominican Friar Jean-Baptiste Labat concluded that West Indian mulattoes combined in "equal force" both traits of black and white parents. Culturally, in the United States, only the black ancestry counted toward racial identification (Sollors 42-43).

¹⁷ Mesquita suggests the women's lives in *Absalom, Absalom!* are dictated by "men's external feuding both at familial and military levels." Women's social world disintegrates as a result of men's destructiveness (Mesquita 55-56).

¹⁸ Analysis of the narrative structure of *Absalom, Absalom!* is not the focus of this paper, although it is important because of the different viewpoints each narrator brings to the story's development and Faulkner's exploration of the South's difficult history. Lynn Gartrell Levins' article, "The Four Narrative Perspectives in *Absalom, Absalom!*" presents three of the four narratives of Rosa Coldfield, Mr. Compson, and Quentin/Shreve as "interpretive act[s] of imagination" as they construct the Sutpen legend as people who are "emotionally involved in the Southerner's shared past" (35).

¹⁹ Urgo and Polk allow that most critics accept the reason for Sutpen's repudiation of his wife and son is their black blood, which Quentin and Shreve conclude in Chapter VIII. Urgo and Polk argue that "this is very unlikely, since if Charles Bon is this son he has no trouble passing for white in his youth and young adulthood. The son may have possessed some other feature by which Sutpen surmised that his wife had been unfaithful; Sutpen may have learned from an attending physician or midwife that this birth was not his wife's first, and she was thus not a virgin when she married Sutpen. The child may have been born with some physical or mental defect" (Urgo and Polk 141).

²⁰ Although the nature of the business involvement with Sutpen is not revealed, in discussing it, Rosa Coldfield insists her father's conscience had driven him to withdraw for the deal and take a financial loss. Oddly, "he did permit his daughter to marry this man of whose actions his conscience did not approve" (*Absalom* 38-39).

²¹ Even though Mr. Compson was referencing the New Orleans octoroon women who trained as courtesans, I believe he is also talking about all elite white women in his comment.

²² It seems to me that Quentin is also a relic, for he is stuck in the southern culture of his ancestors as illustrated in a line from *Absalom, Absalom!* which describes his connection with the past as “that which [Quentin] already knew since he had been born in and still breathed the same air in which the church bells had rung on that Sunday morning in 1833” (23).

²³ Although southern women were known for their gentleness and delicacy, they also had strength of conviction about the southern war effort. General Order 28 illustrates their feistiness and determination to express their loyalties in the face of the hated Yankee enemy. Drew Gilpin Faust suggests the issuance of the order in response to women’s derisive gestures at Yankee soldiers was an indication of their political power (*Mothers* 210).

²⁴ Mesquita suggests Faulkner was showing that the disruption in race relations happened in both directions. The white women during the war had to accept commonality with blacks to survive. At the same time, the blacks were able to show their worth (67).

²⁵ In his classroom conversations at UVA, Faulkner said that acknowledging Clytie as his daughter was not really important because she was a female and “the important thing to [Sutpen] was he should establish a line of dukes . . . he was going to create a dukedom” (UVA Conversations, May 8, 1958).

²⁶ According to Werner Sollors, the social system “cherishes social mobility and espouses the right of individuals to make themselves anew by changing name, place and

fortune.” The white man is the self-made man, “but the racial passer is the ‘imposter’ for trying to embrace his white ancestry as his own” (250).

²⁷ In New Orleans, interracial unions were “ritualized” at quadroon balls where “wealthy white men courted quadroon women.” These outlets for socializing could lead to a “legal and contractual relationship known . . . as plaçage, whereby a white gentleman supported a young quadroon woman and her mother, provided them with a home, and gave his name to any offspring” (Brattain 629).

²⁸ Sollors contends: “It was Sutpen’s failure to recognize Bon [as his son] both at his birth and at the time of crisis, that once set inevitably into motion now completes the downfall of the house of Sutpen” (330).

²⁹ Kate Chopin also includes a reference to fingernails in “*Désirée’s Baby*” as a clue to the baby’s racial heritage: “Look at his legs, mamma, and his hands and his fingernails – real fingernails” (241).

³⁰ Diane Roberts defines Charles Bon as the “black personification of rape” and calls those “fighting words” in 1860s Mississippi as well as at the time Faulkner wrote *Absalom, Absalom!* in 1936. She goes on to say the 1860s killing of Charles by Henry would be considered a murder; it would be renamed a lynching to fit 1936 culture of dealing with a black rapist (94).

³¹ Eric Sundquist makes the argument this way: “The potential miscegenation between Bon and Judith cancels out the potential incest. No one fact more dramatizes the schizophrenic nature of slaveholding miscegenation. In killing for the first, Henry denies the latter. Bon is not his brother but, as he himself puts it to Henry, ‘the nigger that’s going to sleep with your sister’” (134).

³² Bleikasten argues Christmas could choose to be white or black, “yet he chooses not to choose; refuses to settle for either of the ready-made identity patterns urged upon him by Southern society. Were he able to merge or transcend them, he could achieve a self beyond race truly his own” (Bleikasten 83).

³³ Faulkner biographer and historian Cleanth Brooks argues that no firm proof exists that Christmas is black since his father’s race is only the speculation of a circus owner, while Christmas’s mother Minnie insists her lover is Mexican (49-51).

³⁴ No person can exist outside society, according to Bleikasten. Likewise, everyone must abide by its self-made rules. Thus, when a conflict exists between the individual and the community, the pressure of society will prevail (Bleikasten 82). Christmas’s and Burden’s absence of racial and gender conformity cannot be tolerated, and they are punished for it. Kate Chopin also wrote about the phenomenon in *The Awakening* in which Edna Pontellier drowns rather than be pressured into a societal requirement she disdains.

³⁵ Roberts suggests that in Faulkner’s inversion of “the ‘rape theme,’ the women who long most deeply for union with [black men] are those officially deprived of their sexuality, Old Maids” (170).

³⁶ Her biographer, Emily Toth, suggested Chopin was able to see “life from many sides all at once” (139). She also suggested that Chopin wrote what she knew about the differences, for example, between Louisiana and St. Louis that appear in *At Fault* (Toth 119). Her stories were described as having excellent “local color” in *Saint Louis Republic*, October 1880, striking “as true to life” in *Saint Louis Life*, October 1880, and

“dealing with existent conditions” in *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat*, May 1899 (*At Fault*, “Contemporary Reviews” 168, 169; *Awakening*, “Criticism” 163).

³⁷ Toth suggests Chopin based her portrayal on Mrs. Harriet Worthinton, who “championed women’s education but also campaigned for temperance and trumpeted her own militant Protestantism” (115).

³⁸ Critic Helen Taylor, for example, argues that *The Awakening* has a “feminist subtext” (309).

³⁹ In Chopin’s will, she gave her only daughter Lélia the most valuable property so that she would not have to marry for financial support. She gave it to Lélia for “her sole and separate use, free from any debts of or claims against her husband,” according to the language of the will (Toth and Seyersted 300-301).

⁴⁰ The Louisiana Civil Code of 1825 was revised “to outlaw the legitimization of biracial children by white fathers, prohibit children of color from claiming paternity from white fathers, and make it more difficult for biracial children to receive an inheritance by disallowing all but formal legal acknowledgement as a basis for establishing paternity” (Brattain 629-630).

⁴¹ Concubinage was legally permissible until it was outlawed in 1908. With Louisiana Act 87, “concubinage between a person of the caucasian race and a person of the negro race” became a felony (Sollors 404).

⁴² Margaret D. Baur makes a strong case that Armand knew of his black ancestry and was “passing” as white. She argues he used the foundling Désirée as his cover, since it would be assumed that she possessed a black “stain” if their child developed African American features (Baur 161-162). As previously noted, Louisiana Civil Code of 1825

would have made Armand's parents' marriage illegal and also prohibited his ownership of L'Abri.

⁴³ In his study of miscegenation in the United States, Joel Williamson defines passing as "crossing the race line and winning acceptance as white in the white world" (qtd. in Sollors 247), exactly as Armand has been consciously or unconsciously doing his entire life.

⁴⁴ Donald Ringe has dated the beginning of *At Fault* to be 1881, which was "the year the Texas and Pacific Railroad was built in Natchitoches Parish" (qtd. in Campbell 33).

⁴⁵ The critical reviews from which the quotations are taken each appear in October 1890 editions of *Saint Louis Republic*, *Saint Louis Life* and *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, respectively.

⁴⁶ I have chosen as the text *At Fault: A Scholarly Edition with Background Readings*, edited by Suzanne Disheroon Green and David J. Caudle. It contains some useful excerpts on the culture of Louisiana in the period in which the novel occurs. It also contains transcriptions of newspaper reviews of Chopin's fiction.

⁴⁷ The Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, 13th, 14th and 15th Constitutional Amendments and Civil Rights Acts of 1866, 1870, 1871 and 1875 that were enacted during the Civil War and Reconstruction "temporarily undermined but ultimately strengthened most anti-miscegenation laws." Southerners feared that emancipation would promote sex across racial lines, so new state laws, including Jim Crow laws, were put in place to keep separate the white and black races (Brattain 630).

⁴⁸ Discussion of the marriage plot in *At Fault* is not the subject of this commentary, although much has been written about Thérèse Lafirme being at fault for interfering in David Hosmer's relationship with Fanny and thereby wrecking all of their personal lives for a time. See Kate Chopin's response to *The Natchitoches Enterprise* review that erroneously cited Fanny rather than Thérèse as being at fault (Toth and Seyersted 202).

⁴⁹ "Crimes against property were considered by district attorneys and judges in rural Louisiana to be the most heinous offenses," according to a Gilles Vandal's study of crime in rural Louisiana from 1866 – 1876 (*At Fault*, "Crimes" 204-205).

⁵⁰ According to the historian Annie Stahl: "While the whites were superior to them [free people of color], they in turn were superior to blacks and objected just as strenuously to associating with them as the whites objected to mingling with free negroes" (qtd. in Baur 170).

⁵¹ Critics, such as Michele Birnbaum analyze Edna Pontellier's sexual "awakening," which is not the subject of this discussion.

⁵² I have chosen as a text the Norton Critical Edition of *The Awakening*, edited by Margo Culley. It contains useful extracts from literary criticism as well as some notes on the culture of 1890s New Orleans.

⁵³ The classification system in Louisiana was developed when African slaves first arrived. "Special terminology denoted the ratio of Negro blood to Caucasian blood which each non-white possessed." Negro=full Negro blood; Sacatra=7/8 Negro-1/8 white; Griffe=3/4 Negro-1/4 white; Mulatto=1/2 Negro-1/2 white; Quadroon=1/4 Negro-3/4 white; Octoroon=1/8 Negro-7/8 white. (*At Fault*, "Creoles of Color" 238).

⁵⁴ Columbia history professor William A. Dunning and his disciples “gave elaborate and expert documentation to a story already accepted” in the South (Railton 55). This “story” was considered historical fact for decades.

⁵⁵ Donna Sommerville’s research of twelve southern states from 1800-1865, revealed “over 250 cases of sexual assault by black males.” In Virginia, where records were particularly extensive, her investigation showed that in nearly half of the 150 cases in which blacks were condemned to die for sexual assault, they were not put to death (484-484).

⁵⁶ Sommerville and other historians, such as Martha Hodes have suggested that race is not the only important element of southern society that should be studied. Her research reveals that there were competing loyalties and interests beyond race, such as class and economics, in the antebellum South, which the study of the rape myth exposes (Sommerville 517).

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